The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison

Ralph Ellison

Revised and updated

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edited and with an introduction by

John F. Callahan

preface by Saul Bellow

"[Ellison's] essays never fail to be elegantly written, beautifully composed, and intellectually sophisticated." —*Los Angeles Times*

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RALPH ELLISON

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
JOHN F. CALLAHAN

PREFACE BY
SAUL BELLOW

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RALPH ELLISON

Ralph Waldo Ellison was born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, on March 1, 1914. His father was a construction foreman and later the owner of a small ice-and-coal business who died when his son was three. Ellison and his younger brother, Herbert, were raised by their mother, who worked as a nursemaid, janitress, and domestic, and was active in politics. As a child he was drawn to music, playing trumpet from an early age and studying classical composition at Tuskegee Institute under the instruction of William L. Dawson. Of his musical in uences he later said: “The great emphasis in my school was upon classical music, but such great jazz musicians as Hot Lips Page, Jimmy Rushing, and Lester Young were living in Oklahoma City.… As it turned out, the perfection, the artistic dedication which helped me as a writer, was not so much in the classical emphasis as in the jazz itself.”

In July 1936, after his junior year at Tuskegee, Ellison went to New York to earn money for his senior year and to study sculpture, and stayed. In June 1937 his friendship with Richard Wright began and led him toward becoming a writer. Ellison also made the acquaintance of Langston Hughes and the painter Romare Bearden, among others. From 1938 until World War II he worked on the New York Federal Writers Project of the WPA. Starting in the late 1930s, he contributed reviews, essays, and short ction to *New Masses, Tomorrow, The Negro Quarterly* (of which he was for a time managing editor), *New Republic, Saturday Review, Antioch Review, Reporter*, and other periodicals. During the war he served in the Merchant Marine, and afterward he worked at a variety of jobs, including freelance photography and the building and installation of audio systems.

Over a period of seven years Ellison wrote *Invisible Man*, which was recognized upon its publication in 1952 as one of the most

important works of ction of its time. It was on the bestseller list for sixteen weeks and won the National Book Award. Its critical reputation and popularity have only grown in the more than four decades since its publication. Although an excerpt from a second novel was published in *Noble Savage* in 1960, and seven other selections in various literary

magazines between then and 1977, no other long work of ction has yet appeared under Ellison's name.

Shadow and Act (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986) collect essays and interviews written over more than forty years.

From 1955 to 1957 Ellison was a fellow of the American Academy in Rome. Returning to the United States, he taught and lectured at a wide range of institutions including Bard College, the State University of New York at Stony Brook, the University of Chicago, Rutgers, Harvard, Brown, and Yale. He was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1969; the *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres* in 1970 by the French Minister of Culture, Andre Malraux; and the National Medal of Arts in 1985. He was a charter member of the National Council on the Arts and Humanities, and from 1970 to 1979 was Albert Schweitzer Professor in the Humanities at New York University.

After a brief rst marriage Ellison married Fanny McConnell in 1946; for more than forty years, until his passing on April 16, 1994, they lived on Riverside Drive in Harlem.

Posthumous editions of Ellison's work, edited and with an introduction by John F. Callahan, include *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (1995), *Flying Home and Other Stories* (1996), and *Juneteenth* (1998), each published by Random House, Inc.

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English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, opened his abundant les, provided a tape and transcription of Ellison's 1971 speech honoring William L. Dawson, and o ered helpful suggestions about possible sequences for the essays.

I am more indebted than I can say to Mrs. Fanny Ellison. She endured and aided my perusal of her late husband's les and papers, and, as Ralph Ellison's "best reader," she shared indispensable information and insight about the composition and context of previously uncollected or unpublished writing.

PREFACE

Saul Bellow

RALPH ELLISON, who died last year at the age of eighty, published only one novel in his lifetime.

In 1953 at a Bard College Symposium dinner attended by foreign celebrities, Georges Simenon, who sat at our table, asked Ellison how many novels he had written, and when he learned that there was only one he said, "To be a novelist one must produce many novels. Ergo, you are not a novelist."

The author of hundreds of books, writing and speaking at high speed, was not in the habit of pausing to weigh his words. Einstein, a much deeper thinker, had said in reply to a "sociable" lady's question about quantum theory (why, under such and such conditions, was there only one quantum?), "But isn't one a lot, madam?"

In Ralph's case it certainly was a lot. Simenon remains readable and enjoyable, but Inspector Maigret is nally like an overly exploited mine. Novels in the suspense genre developed by Simenon can be considered as the chapters of a single fat novel. Maigret belongs to a large family of cops or private eyes, geniuses of detection like Sherlock Holmes or the heroes of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, *et al.* These gifted men worked honorably at the writers' trade. Ellison did no such thing. He had a calling, not a trade and what we witness in *Invisible Man* is the discovery by an

artist of his true subject matter. Some fty years after it was published, this book holds its own among the best novels of the century.

Toward the end of the fties, the Ellisons and the Bellows lived together in a spooky Dutchess County house with the Catskills on

the western horizon and the Hudson River—“the lordly Hudson,” as Paul Goodman has described it—in between. Ralph was then teaching at Bard College, two miles down the road. Ralph’s wife, Fanny, had a city job; she was, I think, chief fund-raiser for Gordon S. Seagrave, the Burma Surgeon. My children spent their holidays with me, and occasionally my Aunt Jennie came up from New York.

Fanny arrived regularly on Friday evening and returned on Sunday afternoon. As writers are natural solitaries, Ralph and I did not seek each other out during the day. A nod in passing was enough. We had our daily tasks. When he was not writing, Ralph tended his African violets in the emptiness of the sunny ballroom, watering them with a turkey baster. He tinkered in the driveway with his Chrysler engine. He walked in the woods with the black Labrador retriever he had bought from John Cheever.

Cheever didn’t live nearby—he was in Ossining—but we did have literary company in Dutchess County. Richard Rovere lived in Rhinebeck; near him was Fred Dupee; Gore Vidal had bought a ne house on the riverbank just beyond the New York Central tracks.

Ralph and I in our slummy mansion could not entertain these far more prosperous literary country squires. The Dupees and the Roveres gave us dinner from time to time, and Gore Vidal viewed us with a certain ironic pity; socially we didn’t exist for him. A complex character, Gore, a man of the world in many worlds. “A campy patrician,” said Ralph. We were as amused by him as he was by us.

As for me, well, Max Weber described the Jews as aristocratic pariahs. Ralph himself had an aristocratic demeanor. No one in our Dutchess County group was altogether free from pride. Gore had genealogical claims, and money as well. Dupee had his a nities with Henry James and Marcel Proust. The presence of a Jew or a Negro in any group is apt to promote a sense of

superiority in those who—whatever else—are neither Jews nor Negroes. The only genuine democrat in our literary set was Dick Rovere.

Ralph had the bearing of a distinguished man. Proper pride, Aristotle might have called it—an appropriate kind of avowal. A man should claim his due.

And why shouldn't he have thought well of himself? A young Negro from Oklahoma City and Tuskegee, he had set his sights high; he had learned from Malraux as well as from Richard Wright, and with *Invisible Man* he had earned the right to be taken seriously.

Unlike the majority of his Negro contemporaries he was not limited in his interests to the race problem. He was an artist.

In the Tivoli, New York, mansion, locally known as the Larrabee farm most of the great rooms were empty. We did not seek each other out. We occasionally passed each other in the bare corridors.

Our habitual meeting place was the agstone-paved kitchen at breakfast and again at cocktail time. In the morning Ralph came below in a many-colored dressing gown from North Africa—a Joseph's coat one was not likely to see elsewhere in the Hudson Valley. On his feet were substantial slippers that turned up at the toes, Turkish style. Silent, he brewed co ee in a Chemex (and for the last forty years I have followed the same method). As he waited for the water, carefully measured to work through the grounds, he would occasionally massage his nose so strongly that you could hear the crack of the cartilage. Perhaps the object was to expel the sleep from his face. I never asked him why it was only in the morning that he did it.

There was little or no conversation at breakfast. But late in the afternoon Ralph mixed martinis, and we didn't drink them in silence. During our long conversations I came to know his views, some of which I shall now transmit in his own words.

"We did not develop as a people in isolation," Ralph told James MacPherson in an interview. "We developed within a context of white people. Yes, we have a special awareness, because our experience has in

certain ways been di erent from that of white people, but it was not absolutely di erent."

"I tell white kids that instead of talking about black men in a white world or black men in a white society, they should ask themselves how black *they* are, because black men have been in uencing the values of the society and the art forms of the society.…"

"For me," Ralph said, "some e ort was necessary … before I could identify the areas of life and personality which claimed my mind beyond any limitations apparently imposed by my racial identity."

And again: "This was no matter of sudden insight but of slow and blundering discovery of a struggle to stare down the deadly and hypnotic temptation to interpret the world and all its devices in terms of race."

It took great courage in a time when racial solidarity was demanded, or exacted, from people in public life, to insist as Ralph did on the priority of art and the independence of the artist.

"Fiction," he says, "became the agency of my e orts to answer the questions: Who am I, what am I, how did I come to be? What should I make of the life around me?… What does American society mean when regarded out of my *own* eyes, when informed by my *own* sense of the past and viewed by my *own* complex sense of the present?…

It is quite possible," he adds, "that much potential ction by Negro Americans fails precisely at this point: through the writers' refusal (often through provincialism or lack of courage or opportunism) to achieve a vision of life and a resourcefulness of craft commensurate with the complexity of their actual situation. Too often they fear to leave the uneasy sanctuary of race to take their chances in the world of art." He himself did no such thing.

I have let Ralph speak for himself, *but* there is one thing more, of a personal nature, that I should like to add in closing. Often when I think of Ralph a line from e. e. cummings comes to me: "Jesus! He was a handsome man," cummings wrote. He was referring to Bu alo Bill. Ralph did not ride a

watersmooth stallion, nor was he a famous marksman, but he did have the look of a man from an earlier epoch, one more sane, more serious and more courageous than our own.

—

SAUL BELLOW is the author of twelve novels and numerous novellas and stories. He is the only novelist to receive three National Book awards, for *The Adventures of Augie March*, *Herzog*, and *Mr.*

Sammler's Planet. In 1975 he won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel

Humboldt's Gift. The Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to him in 1976. In 1990 Mr. Bellow was presented the National Book Award Foundation Medal for distinguished contribution to American letters.

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INTRODUCTION

John F. Callahan

IN his 1988 eulogy for the painter Romare Bearden, Ralph Ellison made the collage a metaphor for America. Paying tribute to the artist as “a great master of collage,” Ellison told his mourners that

“we are a *collage of a nation*, a nation that is ever shifting about and grousing as we seek to achieve the promised design of democracy.”

He considered the country and the culture to be compositions forged out of the experimental attitude and improvisatory impulse so unsuppressible in American experience. As discrete compositions and an unfolding oeuvre, Ellison’s essays, too, are literary variations on the form and materials of collage. In shape, he wrote, “my essays tend to be somewhat ‘mammy-made’ or eclectic,” meaning that they have the uid, familiar yet arresting texture of jazz improvisations on a well-known theme. Grounding his ri s and variations on the bass line of American identity, Ellison pursues the copious, contradictory manifestations of this country’s “promised design of democracy.”

Whether writing autobiographical essays about his life and times in Oklahoma, Tuskegee, or New York City; literary essays in which he reminds us that the American ideal is equality, the American theory pragmatism, and the American style the vernacular; music criticism in which he articulates how “in improvised jazz, performance and creation can consist of a single complex act”; or cultural criticism reminiscent of Henry James’s “conscientious consciousness,” Ellison interprets the American scene. Equality, improvisation, pragmatism as enacted by the American

“thinker-tinker,” the vernacular consciousness, and that unity born of true complexity: these outcroppings of the American theme mark the terrain of everything Ellison wrote, ction and non ction alike. The

territory he explores as an essayist becomes a slowly settled, open country of the imagination through which he pursues the meaning and mystery, the promise and betrayals, and above all the complex past, present, and future possibilities of an American democracy.

For Ellison writing is a password to freedom. His writer’s middle passage is a liberating examination of the uid democratic experience wherein “the values, ideals, assumptions and memories of unique individuals and groups reach out across the divisions wrought by our national diversity and touch us all.” Keeping in mind the “very stern discipline” of artist and citizen, Ellison observes of our shared American traditions and ideals that “again and again they must be given further extension.” In essay after essay, from his 1940 “A Congress Jim Crow Didn’t Attend” to the 1992 Address at the Whiting Foundation, he writes simultaneously of the ideal, actual, and aspired-to condition of the American nation.

“Geography is fate,” Ellison wrote, and he invoked Heraclitus’s axiom on more than one occasion. Who we are is bound up with where we are, he believed, and, unsurprisingly, Oklahoma, where he was born, has a special provenance in his essays. Despite its prominence as a haven for escaped slaves, its history as the bitter destination of the ve great Indian nations compelled to walk the Trail of Tears, and as a freewheeling “Indian territory” opened for white settlement in the late 1880s, Oklahoma did not become a state until 1907, a mere seven years before Ellison’s birth. Its uid, vigorous Southwestern character (maintained in the face of Governor Alfalfa Bill Murray’s odiously e ective e orts to give it the jim crow texture and laws of a Southern state), encouraged Ellison to dream, along with several other young black companions, of becoming a unifying Renaissance man in a society he hoped he would move closer to ful lling its democratic ideal of equality and opportunity. Even in his boyhood sense of geography Ellison realized that Oklahoma was the territory (the “Indian nation”) lit out for by Huck Finn, that prototypical potential vernacular American Renaissance man. (Later, conscious of his literary descent from Mark

Twain, Ellison would write that “the territory is an ideal place—ever to be sought, ever to be missed, but always there.”)

As a young man pursuing his dream, Ellison aspired to become a symphonic composer, and to equal Wagner by completing his rst symphony by the time he was twenty-six. From an early age he read widely and voraciously, listening to and beginning to master the improvisational techniques of jazz and the complex forms of classical music. Asked much later if his “desire to be a symphony composer rather than a jazz instrumentalist [stood] for a sort of denial of [his] own cultural situation,” he changed the questioner’s frequency without hesitation: “No, no. You see, what is often misunderstood nowadays is that there wasn’t always this division between the ambitions of jazz musicians and the standards of classical music; the idea was to master both traditions.”

Perhaps, too, Ellison’s sense of himself as an Oklahoman became a strong force mediating between North and South in his adult imagination. Frequently in his writing he declares allegiance to ideals embraced tfully before, during, and after the Civil War by Northerners, though, as he notes in his “Commencement Address at the College of William and Mary,” these ideas were rst enunciated by Virginians in the eighteenth century. At the same time he is loyal to the human ties and sensuous feel of things associated with the South—what, at Ellison’s funeral, novelist William Styron recalled as “Southern matters” cherished by his friend: the love of dogs, whiskey, and hunting that was part of both men’s quest for identity and that longing for kinship with the land and the fathers immortalized in Faulkner’s “The Bear.”

As many of his essays attest, Oklahoma o ered Ellison a synthesizing principle for his life and art. His background and experience there with music, religion, politics, sports, and sundry odd jobs and occupations made it easier for him to keep to the high ground in that lower-case civil war of literature, culture, art, and politics carried on by many of his contemporaries into the 1950s, 1960s, and beyond. His “cold Oklahoma Negro eye” provided him perspective on Alabama, where he had lived during three years at Tuskegee, and New York—Harlem where he made his home and

the other diverse circles of “social hierarchy” in the city where he resided for some fty-ve years.

“Just before the terrible [Tulsa] riot of 1921,” Ellison moved to Gary, Indiana, where his mother’s brother lived. Soon after, however, “a depression in steel” aborted the move, and together with his mother and younger brother Herbert, he returned to Oklahoma City. There he stayed until 1933 when, hoboing on the freights of half a dozen railroads, he zigzagged his way to Alabama.

In July 1936, after three years at Tuskegee, he made what he thought would be a temporary move to New York to earn money for his senior year. The plan didn’t work out; besides, New York was a seductive artistic, intellectual, and social milieu for the aspiring composer, so he stayed. His early New York years were interrupted by some six months in Dayton, Ohio, occasioned by his mother’s unexpected fatal illness and death in October 1937.

Soon after returning in 1938 to work on the Federal Writers Project, Ellison became a quintessential New Yorker—an Oklahoman who adopted and was adopted by the city. There he met many who, like him, brought vivid memories to New York and were sustained by a continuing inner experience of their places of origin.

As a black American staking his claim to the society’s “unknown territory” of art and imagination, Ellison strove to make the invisible visible, the unheard heard. Asked by the *Paris Review* in 1955 if “the search for identity is primarily an American theme,” he dropped his right hand, paused, and followed with a mock uppercut to the interviewer’s chin before replying: “It is *the* American theme.”

Ellison sought a formal center of gravity for his essays, knowing that there is little which is static or simple about the country’s *e pluribus unum* creed. He “was aware that when one attempts to mix literary modes in the interest of making disparate materials into rhetorical wholes one runs the risk of leaving structural holes—

YET.” In the name of complexity Ellison accepts “structural holes”

as a fair price for embracing the “disparate materials” of his culture.

Nevertheless, as his musician’s ear caught the bottled-up quality of idiom and cadence, he broke up his sentence with “YET.” Ellison’s

“YET” is characteristic of his resilient, syncopated style. Sounding a jazzman’s note in the midst of a somewhat stu y and formal étude, a note as “irreverent” as what he called, describing Invisible Man’s

intrusion into his writer’s consciousness in the summer of 1945, “a honky-tonk trumpet blasting through a performance, say, of Britten’s *War Requiem*,” Ellison bends the essay into a vernacular as well as a classical form—in short, into a collage. In this spirit he brews his essays out of “disparate materials” from every facet of American life. Low and high and in the middle; it makes no di erence, he might have said of these diverse vernacular ingredients: “It all good.”

The vernacular Ellison inhaled from the music and speech riding the air in Oklahoma City was more than what he called “our most characteristic American style.” For him, vernacular became “a dynamic *process* in which the most re ned styles from the past are continually

merged

with

the

play-it-by-eye-and-by-ear

improvisations which we invent in our e orts to control our environment and entertain ourselves." To bridge classical and vernacular idioms and techniques, he remembered and relied on the black church as a nourishing, inspirational, sometimes underground national institution, "wherein you heard the lingering accents of nineteenth-century rhetoric with its emphasis upon freedom and individual responsibility, a rhetorical style which gave us Lincoln, Harriet Tubman, Harriet Beecher Stowe and the other abolition-preaching Beechers. Which gave us Frederick Douglass, John Jasper and many other eloquent and heroic Negroes whose spirit still moves among us through the contributions they made to the exibility, music and idealism of the American language." In the rhythms and periods of this passage from "Remembering Richard Wright" (1971), Ellison's prose moves across nineteenth-century waters to a twentieth-century territory where he puts modern literary craft in touch with the techniques of oratorical eloquence.

He chose for ancestors those rhetoricians who assumed a responsibility for the American language consciously bound up with their responsibility for the nation's and their own moral identity.

• • •

"Either I'm nobody or I'm a nation," declares one of poet Derek Walcott's characters. This memorable line calls up Ellison's dangerous whole-souled commitment to American identity—what Invisible Man called the "beautiful absurdity of [our] American identity"—and his embrace of citizenship as a necessary a rmation of what Invisible Man identi ed as "the principle." Yet there was nothing easy or unexamined about Ellison's allegiance. As he wrote in response to the claim that he was a patriotic writer: "It ain't the theory which bothers me, it's the practice. My problem is to a rm while resisting." And his complex individual passion about American identity and "the moral imperatives of American life" only intensi ed his allegiance to his people, his group. "We need as many individuals developing their individual talents as possible," he told James

Alan McPherson, "*but* dedicating some part of their energies to the group." About his own e orts as a conscious and conscientious member of the tribe, Ellison is positively erce: "And damnit, I've *done* that. I've always written out of a sense of the group experience as ltered through my individual experiences, talent, and vision."

Not for nothing did Ellison follow Richard Wright's suggestion that he study Henry James's prefaces. Introspection about the meaning and sensibility of black American identity is an imperative for Ellison. "We do too little of this," he once said of the need to

"evaluate Negro experience from the inside." He went on to bear witness to the fact that "over and over again when we nd bunches of Negroes enjoying themselves, when they're feeling good and in a mood of communion, they sit around and marvel at what a damnably marvelous human being, what a confounding human type the Negro American really is." Here, on Ellison's ground, is the case for his conviction that "the way home we seek is that condition of man's being at home in the world, which is called love, and which we term democracy." According to Ellison's paradox, the type of individual who evolved into the black American did so within the American crucible despite and, perforce, because of terri c obstacles. More than that, Ellison's essays revisit Invisible Man's speculation that "they had exhausted in us some—not much, but

some—of the human greed and smallness, yes, and the fear and superstition that had kept them running."

Ellison's compassionate, exacting focus on Abraham Lincoln and other gures from the American past pre gures Reverend Hickman's brooding testimony in the novel-in-progress that "[Lincoln] joined us in what we have been forced to learn about living." Like Lincoln and Lincoln's friend and sometime moral adversary Frederick Douglass, Ellison would sustain and enhance the self's union as well as the nation's. In Ellison's case, the union in question was the union of musician with writer, jazzman with classicist, black man with American, and the man of form with the respecter of chaos.

In terms of race, self, and nation much has been made of the way Invisible Man's last words—"Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"—generalize the predicament of invisibility from its speci c location in African-American experience.

But without the rich, vivid, various explicitness of the black American experience, including the protest, which the author put into *Invisible Man* [1952], the novel would have lacked universal appeal. The book's power to compel others to see *their* reality through the prism of African-American experience rests on Ellison's delity to the particulars of that experience. Clothed in the discursive prose and Burkean "representative anecdotes" of his essays, Ellison's theme remains the complexity of the African-American experience. Convinced of its indivisibility from American experience, he o ers his readers lessons in how to see and hear

"around corners," insisting that "whatever else the true American is, he is also somehow black."

None of this implies that Ellison minimizes the racial injustice perpetrated by Americans, often in the name of America. (" 'If It's Optic White, It's the Right White" goes the motto of Liberty Paints in *Invisible Man*. Threaded through Ellison's essays like a watermark is one taut acknowledgment after another of racial oppression in America. The physical, psychological, and emotional cruelties of slavery are here, and so are the legal, illegal, and habitual violent betrayals of Reconstruction. So are lynching and its rippling e ects

of fear and terror. So are painful incidents of discrimination from Ellison's youth and adulthood.

Far from ignoring the attempts to compel black Americans into permanent social, political, economic, cultural, and psychological inequality and inferiority, Ellison makes his people's condition and status the testing ground for the ideals and the experiment of the nation. For him the Civil War, Reconstruction, and its tragic aftermath were the crux of American history and the most dramatic instances of the country's struggle with the potentially fatal contradiction between its democratic theory and practice.

Notwithstanding the victories and advances of the civil rights movement, which Ellison noted and rejoiced in, he observed that the American Civil War had "continued on as *civil war*, lower case, in which that war of arms was replaced by a war of politics, racial and ethnic violence, ritual sacri ce based on race and color, and by economic and judicial repression." Asking "if indeed the outcome of that war has yet been decided," he told a group of Harvard alumni in a 1974 address that "quite frankly it is my opinion that it is still in the balance, and only our enchantment by the spell of the possible, our endless optimism, has led us to assume that it ever really ended." Therefore the challenge to national moral identity revolves around a "play-it-by-eye-and-by-ear" pursuit of the ideal reminiscent of the vernacular style in music, literature, and, for that matter, every facet of what we call *American* culture.

To complement the vernacular and counterpoint his sense of nemesis in the wake of American hubris, Ralph Waldo Ellison falls back "upon the teaching of that earlier Ralph Waldo." He calls for

"conscience and consciousness, more consciousness and more conscientiousness!" Ellison also ri s upon that "spirit of public happiness" with which John Adams and his fellow revolutionaries, including slaves like James Armistead Lafayette, pledged their

"lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor" to the elusive

"principle" in the Declaration.

From 1937 when, at Richard Wright's urging, Ellison published his rst piece, a review of Waters Edward Turpin's novel, *These Low*

Grounds (even here he called for "greater development in technique"

and "closer examination of consciousness"), until his passing in 1994, he wrote more than seventy-ve essays, addresses, reviews, and conference talks. Almost half of these, along with a few of his numerous interviews, were collected in *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986). Most of the essays, he noted in his introduction to *Shadow and Act*, "are occasional pieces, written for magazines whose editors provided

opportunities for me to reduce my thinking—indeed, often to discover what I *did* think—to publishable form." His observations about the occasional and improvisational nature of *Shadow and Act* hold true for the work in *Going to the Territory* and for the uncollected and the unpublished pieces included here. *Occasion* is truly the given of his essays.

The Modern Library *Collected Essays* includes complete texts of the rst editions of *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory*, to which I have made silent minor corrections. I have also included eleven previously published but uncollected essays: "February" (1955),

"Flamenco" (1954), "A Congress Jim Crow Didn't Attend" (1940),

"Tell It Like It Is, Baby" (1965), "A Special Message to Subscribers"

(1980), "Alain Locke" (1974), "Presentation to Bernard Malamud of the Gold Medal for Fiction" (1983), "Introduction to the Thirtieth Anniversary Edition of *Invisible Man"* (1982), "On Being the Target of Discrimination" (1989), "Bearden" (1988), and Ellison's Foreword to the 1988 reissue of John Kouwenhoven's *The Beer Can by the Highway*—again with minor silent corrections. Of these, "A Congress Jim Crow Didn't Attend" was written earliest, in 1940. I selected it for its intrinsic merit and as an intriguing example of the more than thirty articles and reviews Ellison wrote for *New Masses* and other publications on the left in the late 1930s and early 1940s.* From Ellison's interviews I chose James Alan McPherson's "Indivisible Man" and "A Completion of Personality" conducted by the late John Hersey. Both of these emerged from conversations over many months and, in the case of the Hersey piece, years. In each, departing from his usual silence, Ellison engages in extended

discussion of what he had done and what he aspired to do on his un nished second novel.

Finally, the *Collected Essays* includes nine pieces that appear in print for the rst time. For one of these, Ellison's lyrical homage to William L. Dawson at a 1971 Tuskegee Club banquet in Philadelphia, I am indebted to Professor Robert G. O'Meally of Columbia University, who generously provided a tape and transcript which I edited into the present text. Like the

writer's other essays and addresses, these nine are occasional and are instances of his continuing fascination with the complexities of leadership and identity for black Americans. The essays on James Armistead Lafayette (1974), William L. Dawson (1971), Roscoe Dunjee (1972), and, in powerful generalized fashion, Ellison's "Haverford Statement" (1969) and "Working Notes for *Invisible Man"* (undated) celebrate the special contributions of the African-American to the originality of American life. Along with the "Commencement Address at the College of William and Mary" (1972), the "Address to the Harvard College Alumni, Class of 1949" (1974), "Notes for Class Day Talk at Columbia University" (1990), and "Address at the Whiting Foundation" (1992), they show the continuity of Ellison's preoccupation with identity, the cultural and social metamorphoses around him, and the democratic ux of American life in the late twentieth century.

As he grew older, Ellison gave himself more and more to making sense of the American experience "through the wry perspective of sanity-saving comedy." In his last essays, especially "Bearden,"

"Notes for Class Day Talk at Columbia University," and his "Address at the Whiting Foundation," his sensibility approaches serenity. His mind continues to defy shallow simplicities and easy categories of perception and experience—whether from right, left, or center. And his prose grows luminous with an ever-stronger faith in the possibilities—not the achievement, but the possibilities—of the American ideal. The wisdom of the last essays is all the more moving because of Ellison's spirit of playfulness. For example, he closes his "Class Day" notes with a witty, admonishing paraphrase of Francis Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven" in which he

transforms God's hound into the "ideal of social equality"—recall Invisible Man's slip of "social equality" for "social responsibility."

Pursued by our outraged ideal even as we ee it, in Ellison's conceit Americans hear the indignant voice of our sacred democratic muse:

"All things betray thee, who betrayest Me."

The sequences Ellison chose for *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory* respected continuities of form, idea, and theme more than they did chronology. In similar fashion, the opening sequence of the *Collected Essays* calls attention to his di erent guises as essayist: the lyricism of "February," the sense of participation as well as reportage in his stance toward the black voices quoted in "A Congress Jim Crow Didn't Attend," his union of narrative and analytical styles in "Flamenco," and, nally, in "Tell It Like It Is, Baby," his mingling of dream (nightmare, really) with keenly remembered and realized historical details in the ow of the writer's waking consciousness.

The sequence following *Shadow and Act* is framed by essays that reconstruct the origins of *Invisible Man*, its genesis and, in the

"Working Notes," Ellison's early projection of Invisible Man's evolution into a representative type of the black American, and his preliminary outline of Invisible Man's adventures and fate in New York. In between are essays and addresses which elaborate his sense of the mythic importance of ritual to American history and delineate the achievements of several black Americans, as well as the special responsibilities of black intellectuals and every American artist. "A Completion of Personality" follows *Going to the Territory* because of its "aura of a summing up."

I conclude the volume with ve late essays in which Ellison keeps up the good ght to make "rhetorical wholes" out of the "disparate materials" of his writer's mind and experience. These last pieces resonate with his old determination to be true to his American theme and, if he is lucky (you almost hear him chuckle), to inch along toward "helping this country discover a fuller sense of itself as it goes about making its founders' dream a reality." To the end Ellison is true to the writer's mystery—the pain and pleasure of

"pouring into that thing which is being created all of what he

cannot understand, cannot say, cannot even admit in any other way." As these last essays spring to life on the page, they "pulsate with those meanings, emotions, ideas brought by [their] audience,"

and Ellison’s word is made esh. In ful llment of his writer’s dream,

“the artifact is a completion of personality.”

Through the essays ows Ellison’s de ant personal responsibility for democracy and for the parallel vernacular experiment of an American culture indivisible from the nation’s theory and practice.

His “eclectic” and “mammy-made” prose projects two artistic possibilities and realities that he cared about passionately enough to risk the sometimes perilous, self-targeting act of the occasional essay. The rst is the American language, the second the mystery, absurdity, and complexity of American identity. The language, Ellison felt, was as supple, uid, and varied as a jazzman’s horn in the range of frequencies it o ered to writers. In his 1953 address,

“Brave Words for a Startling Occasion,” he sees, hears, and feels the language “swirling with over three hundred years of American living, a mixture of the folk, the Biblical, the scienti c and the political. Slangy in one stance, academic in another, loaded poetically with imagery at one moment, mathematically bare of imagery in the next,” his essays mingle the quirks of idiom and experience he found from Oklahoma to Alabama to New York, and felt as a mysterious complex unity on his travels throughout the American territory. It is this sense of a living American language seething with change, with new accents, expressions, and voices that Ellison keeps faith with through his uid integration of vernacular and classical.

He also keeps faith with what he observes and embraces as

“mysterious and uncertain” in American reality and personality.

“What’s inside you, brother?” he asked in “A Very Stern Discipline”

(1967). “What’s your heart like?” As Ellison keeps faith with the theme and language of America, we feel, to paraphrase Woodridge, Invisible Man’s literature professor, that essay by essay he has composed his own heart’s collage and thereby helped create a culture. Over and over again Ellison

improvises variations on Invisible Man's brooding question about the potential and the fate of

the American experiment: "And, could politics ever be an expression of love?" Ellison would have it so, for there appear in this collage of a collection states of mind and being which compose a union of self, people, and nation. Always a vigilant kinsman aware of "the chaos which lives within the pattern of [our] certainties," Ralph Waldo Ellison writes with a generosity of spirit and perception that, if heeded, might lead to a true end to the civil war still waged in the personal, political, and cultural provinces of America.

*See Robert G. O'Meally's bibliography, "The Writings of Ralph Ellison," in *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison*, ed. Kimberly Benston (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1987), pp. 411–19.

EDITOR'S NOTE

This Modern Library Paperback Classics edition of the *Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* includes Section II of Ellison's "Working Notes for *Invisible Man*," which appears in print here for the rst time. In Section I of the "Working Notes" (p. 344), the phrase "tragic national situation" has been corrected to "tragic irrational situation." In addition, I have reversed the sequence of "Flamenco"

and "A Congress Jim Crow Didn't Attend." In the current edition, the latter piece, rst published in 1940, follows "February," and o ers an immediate glimpse of the young man Ellison had become in Dayton, Ohio, during the winter of 1937-38 after his mother's unexpected death the previous October.

Finally, I have made silent minor corrections and revisions to the Acknowledgments page, the Biographical Note on Ellison, and the Editor's Introduction from the original Modern Library cloth edition of 1995.

July 2003

FEBRUARY

Ellison wrote this lyrical reminiscence long after the desolate winter of 1937-38

when, after his mother's unexpected death in October "in that strange city

[Cincinnati, he] had survived three months o the elds and woods by [his] gun; through ice and snow and homelessness." "February" was published in Saturday Review, *January 1, 1955*.

FEBRUARY is a brook, birds, an apple tree—a day spent alone in the country. Unemployed, tired of reading, and weary of grieving the loss of my mother, I'd gone into the woods to forget. So that now all Februarys have the aura of that early morning coldness, the ghost of quail tracks on the snow-powdered brook which I brushed aside as I broke the brook to drink: and how the little quail tracks went up the ice, precise and delicate, into the darker places of the bank-ledge undisturbed. February is climbing up a hill into the full glare of the early sun, alone in all that immensity of snowscape with distant Dayton drowsing wavery to my eyes like the sound of distant horns.

It's walking through a parklike grove, the tall trees stark, the knee-high snow windblown and pathless, to a decaying shed sheltering a ne old horsedrawn sleigh, carved and scrolled with traces of goldleaf clinging to its aking wood.

And the birds: I descended into a little valley in the windless quiet and the smell of apples and saw the air erupt with red tracer-bullet streaks of ight—across the snows, a carnival of cardinals. The red birds zoomed, the ickers ew, pheasants roared up like gaudy Chinese kimono rags. My heart beat hard and I saw the single tree, black-limbed against the sky, here and there the miracle of a dark red apple still hanging after months of ice and snow. I bent forward and knelt within the circle of the fruit-fall, searching out an apple missed by the birds. Sweet and mellow to the taste, it had been preserved by the leaves and grasses, protected by the snows. And I recalled the valley of two months before: *At the sound of my gun the birds came up along the hill in pairs and swooped with a circling down into the thicket on the other side, and I had gone down into the valley, soft, then, with the glow of sunset, and found the cock quail dead upon the snow, its plumage*

undisturbed, the vapor rising slowly from its sinking blood.… And now in this place of hidden fruit and bird-tracked snow, I was seized with a kind of exhilaration. For I was in my early twenties then, and I had lived through my mother's death in that strange city, had survived three months o the elds and woods by my gun; through ice and snow and homelessness. And now in this windless February instant I had crossed over into a new

phase of living. Shall I say it was in those February snows that I rst became a man?

A CONGRESS JIM CROW DIDN'T ATTEND

Between 1938 and 1942 Ellison contributed numerous articles and reviews, signed and unsigned, and two short stories to New Masses. *"A Congress Jim Crow Didn't Attend" is a narrative essay with personal and public overtones. In it Ellison uses the Third National Negro Congress as an early occasion for speculation on "the ambiguity of Negro leadership." As he soon would do in pieces like "The Way It Is,"*

Ellison celebrates the courageous lives and voices of ordinary Negroes, even declaring that "the age of the Negro hero had returned to American life." It was published in New Masses, *May 14, 1940.*

WE drove all night to beat the crowd. We were going to Washington to attend the Third National Negro Congress. Fog hung over the Delaware roads, over the elds and creeks, so that we could not tell water from grass, except in spots where the fog had lifted. Our headlights brought no answering re ection from the red glass disks on the road signs. Coming out of some town the driver failed to see a road marker and almost wrecked the car. It shook us awake and we talked to keep the driver alert.

Then two things happened to give the trip to the Congress a sharp meaning. It was the sun that started it. It appeared beyond the fog like a ame, as though a distant farmhouse was a re. One of the boys remembered Natchez, Mississippi, * and began talking about it.

I felt depressed. A friend of mine was from Natchez and some of the victims had his family name and I wondered if any had been his relatives.

We talked about conditions down south and I hoped someone from Natchez would attend the Congress, so I could hear about the re rsthand.

Outside of Baltimore we began passing troops of cavalry. They were stretched along the highway for a mile: Young fellows in khaki with campaign hats strapped beneath their chins, jogging sti y in their saddles. I asked one of my companions where they were going and was told that there was an army camp nearby. Someone said that I would nd out “soon enough” and I laughed and said that I was a black Yank and was not coming. But already the troops of cavalry were becoming linked in my mind with the Natchez re.

Where *were* the troops going? We in the car were going to the Third National Negro Congress—but what did *that* mean? Then I was aware that all ve of us in the car were of army age and that just as suddenly as the troops had appeared atop the hill, we might be called to war. Here we were, young Negroes, bitter about the conditions responsible for Natchez and faced with the danger of war, heading for Washington, D.C.

I thought about the Congress. I remembered that some of the Negro papers had been carrying glowing accounts of army life and of the joys of the black French soldiers. Would there be many at the

Congress who had succumbed to these stories? John L. Lewis had asked the support of the Congress in forming a new political movement—possibly a third party—to continue the New Deal measures forsaken by Roosevelt; what would be the response of the Congress? There were rumors that one of the Congress leaders had sold out; how would the rank and le react? Would *I* nd in Washington an a rmation of the Negroes’ will to unity and freedom that would remove the deep sense of the danger of war which had made the sudden appearance of the troops of cavalry seem like a revelation of our fate?

For years Negroes have struggled for that unity, seeking to nd their allies; sometimes gaining, and sometimes losing ground. And in all Negroes at some period of their lives there is that yearning for a sense of group unity that is the yearning of men for a ag: for a unity that cannot be compromised, that cannot be bought; that is conscious of itself, of its strength, that is

militant. I had come to realize that such a unity is unity of a nation, and of a class. I had thought vaguely of the Congress in such terms, but it was more like a hope to be realized. I had not thought to seek this sense of a rmation in it. Now I realized that this was the need it must ll for myself and for others.

Negroes from the North, South, East, and West were heading for Washington, seeking a rmation of their will to freedom. They were coming with their doubts and with their convictions. It was more than just another trip to another congress. When we entered the suburbs of Washington I noticed that the car moved much more slowly than before and started to ask why. But I remembered: there is always that fear among Negroes going from the North into the South of running afoul of Southern custom and Jim Crow laws. The driver knew that we were driving into the capital of the United States—and of legal Jim Crow. The car nosed its way cautiously.

Once in Washington, the rst thing to do was to go to convention headquarters and make arrangements for rooms. We drove to the Department of Labor building. It is a new building and we were relieved to see so many Negro faces, to nd them in charge.

Delegates were already grouped about the big lobby; it hummed

with conversation. They looked up expectantly as we came through the high portals. We made our way to the tables arranged about the lobby where a number of girls were busy registering delegates. They were pretty girls and we were surprised; usually the pretty girls avoided that part of conventions. We were registered and given credentials: a delegate’s card, a badge, a list of instructions, which, among other things, told us to buy a meal ticket. Under Section 2 it told about housing:

After your meal ticket the next important thing is a place to stay. We have done our best. But Washington is a Jim Crow town. We have not broken down Jim Crowism … in large hotels. But we have made history in the matter of housing accommodations for Negroes. First: for 119 delegates we have accommodations in the modern up-to-date Washington Tourist Camp —four blocks away from our place.… Second: for 250 delegates we have arranged for the building of an entire village a few yards away from the

Washington Monument and two blocks away from the convention meeting place. You will be housed in waterproof tents with wooden oors—clean linen—individual cots

—warm blankets. There will be ample facilities for showers.…

Also listed were rooms in private homes. I asked why the village had been built and was told that it was a protest against the miserable housing conditions for Negroes in the capital city. So stretched out beneath the long shadow of Washington's monument, we found lying a village of tents like those discovered by Steinbeck's Joads. Not far away is where the annual Cherry Blossom Festival is held.

Returning to convention headquarters, we nd the delegates pouring in. There is a steady roar of voices. We look about for acquaintances.

"Look! What's that guy's name?" I look up; a short man with a high forehead and glasses squeezes past.

"That's John P. Davis."

"*Davis*, the national secretary?"

"Sure."

"But I've seen his pictures. I thought he was a big guy."

"He's big, all right," someone says. "He told o Dies."

"Thought that was *Ben* Davis."

"Yeah, but this one told him too."

A tall man in a cattleman's hat has been listening: "Now wasn't that something?" he says, "*Both* of 'em got him told. All my life I been wanting to see some of our Negro leaders go down there to Congress and let them know how we felt about things. Didn't think I would live to see it, but it happened. And that's why I'm here this morning!"

The lobby is still lling. There are young people and old people, both from the farms, the small towns, and the cities. I can tell the New Yorkers by their manner, their con dence. But there are also many faces that I learned to know in the South. And I know that someone has sacri ced to get them here. Some are farmers, others sharecroppers. They look sti in their “Sunday” clothes. There are many whites also. And on the lapels of both whites and blacks are to be seen the maroon and white “Stop Lynching” buttons. I walk about the lobby, from group to group, trying to see if I can pick out those from down where being militant, being a man, carries a penalty of dispossession, of ogging, of rape charges, of lynching death. They too are here; one, James McMillian, a preacher-coal miner from Kentucky, has felt the sting of a lynch rope around his neck and lived to tell about it. His rst question is, “What’s being done about the Anti-Lynching Bill?”

I talk with a steelworker from Gary, Indiana. He speaks about the war and ties it up to the convention. He is well informed. Passing another group I hear:

“I come over three hundred miles to this congress.”

“Where you come from?”

“I come from Zenia, Ohio.”

“Hell, you ain’t come nowhere. I come all the way from Texas!”

the other said proudly.

Behind me now, someone is saying: “They tell me John L. Lewis is going to be here.”

“That’s right, it’s here in the program.”

“You know, I been wanting to see that guy. I want to get up close, so’s I can see what he looks like.”

“He sure is talking my way these days. Because from what I know about the Triple A and the FSA out there in Arkansas where I come from, he’s talking

sense!”

“He sounds all right to me, too, but I want to see what he looks like.”

“Well, he’ll be here.”

I walk inside the auditorium where the convention is to be held.

The carpet is thick and deep blue, the ceiling high and soothing to the eyes. In front, on both sides of the speakers’ platform, there are gigantic columns that seem to pull you upward, out of yourself, as your eyes follow them aloft.

The auditorium had that overwhelming air usually associated with huge churches, and I remembered what André Malraux once said about the factory becoming for the workers what the cathedral formerly was, and that they must come to see in it not ideal gods but human power struggling against the earth. The building is dedicated to labor. I hoped that what was to happen there during the Congress would help bring nearer that transformation of which Malraux wrote. When I walked outside the building I learned that it *was*, for the three days of the convention, sacred ground. I suggested to one of my companions that we go uptown for a bite to eat in a cafeteria. He reminded me simply that we were in Washington.

The Congress began that evening, called to order by the rapping of a gavel made from timber from the last slave ship to touch American shores. There on the platform were the speakers. John L.

Lewis appeared with his daughter, Kathryn, and there was a burst of applause from the audience. Lewis spoke plainly and with force, and was frequently interrupted by applause. The audience was with him.

He spoke like a man who knew how to speak to ordinary folks, and they understood him and agreed with him. Lewis said: No group in the population feels more heavily the burden of unemployment and insecurity than the Negro citizens.… The denials of civil liberties lie with

heavy discrimination upon Negroes. Only when these economic and political evils are wiped out will the Negro people be free of them.

I therefore call upon you to join in common cause with labor that we may seek out as American citizens together those political means and instruments by which the common welfare may be promoted.…

Then as his nal word was spoken and applause roared up, they saw John P. Davis step forward and halt Lewis before he could return to his seat. He spoke into the microphone. “I am going to ask Mr. Lewis to come forward with two Negro coal miners who know better than any other group of Negro people of the character, of the leadership of the president of the Congress of Industrial Organizations.” There was a burst of applause and the ashing of press cameras as Davis presented Lewis with a plaque for his

“distinguished service to the Negro people.” In his acceptance Lewis stated what his o er to the Congress seems to prove and what Negroes throughout the country are beginning to believe: You know, I am one American who believes in equality of opportunity for the Negro people. And I do not try to conceal the fact; in fact, I am rather anxious that a great many people nd out about our views in this country and I am doing what I can to educate them on that particular point.

From the applause I was quite sure there was not a single person in the auditorium who did not see in the ceremony a historical importance.

Following John L. Lewis came A. Philip Randolph. He brought into play that deep, resonant voice which had helped him to the presidency of the largest Negro union and of the National Negro Congress itself. The audience was quiet, waiting for him to reveal himself. Several of his recent actions had been strange; his name had appeared in places where the members had not expected to see it, and they were waiting for him to con rm the faith that had led them to make him their president. He spoke of the world crisis, of the split in the ranks of labor, of unemployment. But his voice droned out abstract phrases; statistics rolled forth; the speech became involved, and through it sounded unmistakable notes of

Red-baiting. From time to time he said things which the people felt strongly and they applauded. But soon they became restless; they had heard these arguments before, arguments that sounded strange in the mouth of one who was supposed to be their leader. The speech continued and, before its end, delegates were leaving the auditorium. I had sat through the address with a feeling of betrayal.

I did not realize it, but I had witnessed a leader in the act of killing his leadership.

In his report next morning the national secretary, John P. Davis, voiced the things the delegates felt. He spoke out for the program that they wished to support, and, judging from the reception of the speech, the delegates were assured that theirs was a common will.

We want peace for ourselves and America [Davis said].

We want peace and freedom for the peoples of India, of China, of Africa.…

The administration is taking sides in this imperialist con ict. Its actions menace our neutrality and our peace. We must join with labor, we must join with youth to insist upon an end to this disastrous policy.… The American Negro people will refuse to follow American imperialism in an attack upon the Soviet Union, will refuse to fall victim to anti-Soviet adventures.… I have witnessed the real and genuine equal rights of its [the Soviet Union's] many nations and people busy and working in amity, collaboration, and peace. I know of their deep friendship and aid to all oppressed people.

The whole spirit of the convention rose and enthusiasm mounted.

That afternoon the delegates divided into several panels. The discussions on economic security were led by Louis Burnham, a young man from Harlem. Goldie Ervin of Pennsylvania, an intense young woman, spoke on the problems of the Negro woman. David Lasser of the Workers Alliance was greeted by the audience as a friend. He spoke on unemployment. Other panels were in progress and the delegates discussed their problems with Congressman Marcantonio of New York, with Joseph Gelders of Alabama, and other leaders from urban centers.

But I am looking for those whose very presence here means a danger faced and a fear conquered, and danger to be faced again.

She is a tall black woman from Arkansas. She has asked to address the panel on economic security. She walks slowly to the microphone, and when she raises her head there are strands of gray hair beneath her opping black straw hat. She is not accustomed to speaking through a microphone and has to be instructed to stand before it. She speaks slowly:

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm here to tell youall that we in Arkansas is having a tight time. Folks down there is working for 60 and 75 cents a day. Folks with kids, I mean. Now youall know that ain' nothing fo' no folks with children to be gitting. I come up here to tell youall about it; and to ask youall if there's *anything* youall can do fo' us down in Arkansas, please to do it.

I was proud to come. I mean I was proud to come to this Congress. I was proud my people sent me. You know, we got other people down there who wants to see the hard tasks done. But they's shaky. They's scared they'd be moved o the land. Well, I tell 'em that they moving every day anyhow! I told them if they put me o the land I'll go. I'll do like them folks out there in Missouri done: let 'em put me out on the highway. They got to do something for me. They bet' not harm me. An' if they was to kill me, they'd have to *bury* me.

So I'm just on they hands. *I'm* looking for better conditions for my people.

Well, I want to thank youall for letting me tell you 'bout Arkansas. It ain't all I got to tell you, but it's all for right now. Later on I'm going to tell you some more.

She searches in her bag, brings forth what appears to be a roll of bills.

Oh, yes, I forgot to tell youall about this. Now there's lots of other people down there what wants to come up here. But they ain't got no money. They works all day for 60 and 75 cents and when they through they gits paid o in this stu .

She holds the bills so the audience may see.

I forgits what they calls it—oh, yes, that's right, it's scrip. Scrip. This is what they pay you with. They even got they own money; them planters I mean. You git this and you have to take it to what they call the commissary store to spend

it. You cain't spend it nowhere else. So you see, they's other people who would be up here today, but they ain't got no money. That's the way things is down where I come from. I got lots more to tell youall, but I ain't going to take up any more of youall's time right now. An' I want' thank youall agin for letting me speak.

After the session I found her in the crowd. The city people were shaking her hand. I asked her to tell me more of conditions in Arkansas. She told me that the men were being thrown out of work by mechanical plows, that the children had no fuel for their school-house—how could they learn? She told me that a merchant, upon hearing that the people were trying to send her to the Congress, had given the cannery and agricultural union a contribution. She is the president of her local union, an a liate of the CIO with 260

members. There is a calm dignity about this woman. Where did she get it? I asked her about religion. "Well, son," she told me, "we used to go to the graveyard and preach to folks 'bout heaven. But I done found that the way to serve Christ is by helping folks here on earth."

What I found among the delegates was a temper of militant indignation. They were people sure of their strength. I listened to Owen Whit eld, the hero of the convention. In many of the speeches I had heard the names Gabriel, Denmark Vesey, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass. And in these mouths the names had a new meaning. And I suddenly realized that the age of the Negro hero had returned to American life.

Whit eld led the Missouri highway demonstration of last year. He is the father of twelve children, a farmer for thirty-ve years. He speaks with the skill of the Negro folk-preacher, in terms and images the people understand. The people from the farm country shout

“Amen!” and “It’s the truth!” Whit eld is of the earth and his speech is of the earth, and I said “Amen!” with the farmers. His is not a speech from above, like Randolph’s. He speaks with pride of his Missouri people, and the audience is with him when he lashes out at leaders who avoid positive action out of fear of their “status.”

Whit eld sacri ced his home and farm and led his wife and family out with two thousand white and black families to face the January

weather and the Missouri Highway Patrol. His is the pride of one who knows what it means to ght and win. He made the nation listen to the voices of his people.

Hank Johnson is an urban hero. He is a powerful brown-skinned man over six feet tall. His face is round and in it there is the humor of a small boy. Hank entered the building trades when he was twelve. He and his father were made to pay a Texas local of the AFL

a fee for work permits higher than the regular union dues and were not allowed to attend union meetings. He is now a CIO organizer from the Chicago region and led in organizing the packing-house workers. “How can I defend America right or wrong?” he asks. “I am as good an American as *anybody*, but what would I do if I went down round my home in Austin, Texas, and reported some spies, but got myself lynched?” What Hank Johnson did to me is hard to convey. I have seen many of my friends frustrated in their e ort to create themselves. They are boys full of protest and indignation who have no social outlet. They are unhappy working at jobs they hate, living under restrictions they hate. Hank Johnson was like one of them *transformed*. He is full of indignation, but indignation that has found a direction. When he spoke, all the violence that America has made our Negro heritage was owing from him transformed into a will to change a civilization. The people said of him: “That Hank Johnson, he’s *my* kinda Negro.”

Whit eld and Johnson and the people behind them are the answer to those who wonder why there is such a scramble to raise the Booker T. Washington symbol anew in Negro life; why a bad documentary lm of Tuskegee’s Carver found distribution through RKO. A new pole of

leadership has developed among the Negro people, and the National Negro Congress is their organization. It came suddenly out of the betrayal of the New Deal. First there was the highway demonstration of Missouri; then the de ance of the Klan in Florida, and later Ben Davis “got Dies told.” All these things I felt in the process of crystallization at the Third National Negro Congress. I heard the resolution to join with the CIO and I listened, after Randolph had protested that such an agreement would make for controversy, to a delegate shout out from the oor: “Peonage,

Anti-Lynch Bill, poll tax, these are our issues. They are the most controversial issues in American life, and some of us will have to die for them! Yes, we want to join with the CIO! We cannot stop for controversy!” And there in the faces of my people I saw strength.

There with the whites in the audience I saw the positive forces of civilization and the best guarantee of America’s future.

*Ellison refers to the Rhythm Club re of April 1940 in Natchez, Mississippi. Exits inside the Negro nightclub became blocked while decorations of Spanish moss fueled the ames, and before help arrived over two hundred Negroes burned to death in the crowded club.

FLAMENCO

Ellison had a long-standing passion for amenco. Invisible Man hears “an old woman singing a spiritual as full of Weltschmerz as amenco.” In 1954 after lecturing at the Harvard seminars in Salzburg, Ellison heard amenco in Madrid and Paris. This essay describes the old masters Vicente Escudero and Pepe el del Matrona, and the connections Ellison nds between Spanish folklore and music and American vernacular, especially the blues. “Flamenco” was published in Saturday Review, *December 11, 1954.*

RECENTLY in Paris in Leroy Haynes’s restaurant in the Rue de Martyrs, where American Negro iers and jazz musicians bend over their barbecue and red beans and rice in an attitude as pious as that of any worshiper in Sacre Coeur, which dominates Montmartre above, a gypsy woman entered and told my fortune. She was a handsome woman, dressed in the mysterious, many-skirted costume of the gypsies, and she said that I was

soon to take a journey, and that I was to nd good fortune. I said jokingly that I had had good fortune, for after dreaming of it for many years I had been to Madrid.

“You went when you should have gone,” she said, peering at my hand. “Had you gone earlier you might have found death. But that is of the past. I speak of good fortune in the future.”

“There I heard real amenco,” I said, “and that is a good fortune I shall never forget.”

“Flamenco,” she said. “You understand amenco? Then you must go see Escudero. You must hear Pepe el del Matrona and Rafael Romero.”

“I’ve heard of Escudero,” I said, “but who are these others?”

“You will see,” she said. “You will see and hear also.”

“This is real good fortune,” I said. “I thought Escudero was dead.”

“Not dead,” she said, holding my hand over a damp spot on the tablecloth, “only old. But to see *him* is a little more than to take a walk. The fortune of your hand comes after a journey over water.”

She then o ered, for a further consideration, to tell me other things, but this was enough. I was amused (for sure enough we were ying home two days hence), my wife and friends were laughing that I had submitted to having my palm read, and the knowledge that the legendary Vicente Escudero was dancing again after so many years of retirement was enough good fortune for any one day.

So that evening we saw the old master in the full glory of his resurrection. Dry, now, and birdlike in his grace, Escudero is no longer capable of oor-resounding vigor, but conveys even the stamping fury of the Spanish dance with the gentlest, most delicate, precise, and potent of gestures and movement—reasserting in terms

of his own medium a truth which Schumann-Heink, Roland Hayes, and Povla Frijsh have demonstrated in terms of the art of song: that with the great performer it is his style, so tortuously achieved, so carefully cultivated, which is the last to go down before age. And so with the singer Pepe el del Matrona, who at seventy-four is able to dominate the space of even the largest theatre with his most pianissimo arabesques of sound.

But more important here than the inspiring triumph of artistic style over Time was the triumph, in this most sophisticated of Western cities, of Cante Flamenco, a folk art which has retained its integrity and vitality through two centuries during which the West assumed that it had, through enlightenment, science, and progress, dispensed with those tragic, metaphysical elements of human life which the art of amenco celebrates. Certainly Escudero and Matrona draw a great deal of their vitality from this tradition that contains many elements which the West has dismissed as

"primitive," that epithet so facile for demolishing all things cultural which Westerners do not understand or wish to contemplate.

Perhaps Spain (which is neither Europe nor Africa but a blend of both) was once more challenging our Western optimism. If so, it was not with pessimism but with an a rmative art which draws its strength and endurance from a willingness to deal with the whole man (Unamuno's man of esh and blood who must die) in a world which is viewed as basically impersonal and violent; if so, through her singers and dancers and her amenco music she was making the West a most useful and needed gift.

I haven't yet discovered the speci c nature of the gift of fortune which my gypsy promised me, but until something better appears I'll accept Westminster's new three-volume "Anthology of Cante Flameneo," which has just won the Grand Prix de Disque, as the answer. Escudero isn't in it, but members of his entourage are: Pepe el del Matrona, Rafael Romero, and the great amenco guitarist Perico el del Lunar, who along with eight other artists presents thirty-three excellently recorded examples of amenco song style.

Cante Flamenco is the very ancient folk music of the Andalusian gypsies of southern Spain. Its origins are as mysterious as that of

those of the gypsies themselves, but in it are heard Byzantine, Arabic, Hebraic, and Moorish elements fused and given the violent, rhythmical expressiveness of the gypsies. Cante Flamenco, or *cante hondo* (deep song, as the purer, less orid form is called), is a unique blending of Eastern and Western modes and as such it often ba es when it most intrigues the Western ear. In our own culture the closest music to it in feeling is the Negro blues, early jazz, and the slave songs (now euphemistically termed “spirituals”). Even a casual acquaintance with Westminster’s anthology reveals certain parallels, and jazz fans will receive here a pleasant shock of recognition. Soon to be released free to those who purchase the

“Anthology” is a forty-page booklet containing the text of the songs and a historical survey of amenco literature written by Professor Tomas Andrade de Silva of the Royal Conservatory at Madrid.

Like Negro folk music, Cante Flamenco (which recognizes no complete separation between dance and song, the basic mood, the guitar and castanets, hold all together) is a communal art. In the small rooms in which it is performed there are no “squares” sitting around just to be entertained, everyone participates very much as during a noncommercial jam session or a Southern jazz dance. It can be just as noisy and sweaty and drunken as a Birmingham

“breakdown”; while one singer “ri s” (improvises) or the dancers

“go to town” the others assist by clapping their hands in the intricate percussive manner called *palmada* and by stamping out the rhythms with their feet. When a singer, guitarist, or dancer has negotiated a particularly subtle passage (and this is an art of great re nements) the shouts of *Ole!* arise to express appreciation of his art, to agree with the sentiments expressed, and to encourage him on to even greater eloquence. Very often the “Anthology” side containing the *cantes con baile* (dance songs) sounds like a revivalists’ congregation saying “Amen!” to the preacher.

Flamenco, while traditional in theme and choreography, allows a maximum of individual expression, and a democratic rivalry such as is typical of a jam session; for, like the blues and jazz, it is an art of improvisation, and like

them it can be quite graphic. Even one who doesn’t understand the lyrics will note the uncanny ability of the

singers presented here to produce pictorial e ects with their voices.

Great space, echoes, rolling slopes, the charging of bulls, and the prancing and galloping of horses ow in this sound much as animal cries, train whistles, and the loneliness of night sound through the blues.

The nasal, harsh, anguished tones heard on these sides are not the results of ineptitude or “primitivism”; like the “dirty tone” of the jazz instrumentalist, they are the result of an esthetic which rejects the beautiful sound sought by classical Western music.

Not that amenco is simply a music of despair; this is true mainly of the seguidillas, the soleares, and the saetas (arrows of song) which are sung when the holy images are paraded during Holy Week, and which Rafael Romero sings with a pitch of religious fervor that reminds one of the great Pastora Pavon *(La Niña de los Peines)*. But along with these darker songs the “Anthology” o ers all the contrasts, the gay alegrías, bulerías, sevillanas, the passionate peteneras, lullabies (nana), prison songs, mountain songs, and laments. Love, loneliness, disappointment, pride—all these are themes for Cante Flamenco. Perhaps what attracts us most to amenco, as it does to the blues, is the note of unillusioned a rmation of humanity which it embodies. The gypsies, like the slaves, are an outcast though undefeated people who have never lost their awareness of the physical source of man’s most spiritual moments; even their Christ is a man of esh and bone who su ered and bled before his apotheosis. In its more worldly phases amenco voice resembles the blues voice, which mocks the despair stated explicitly in the lyric, and it expresses the great human joke directed against the universe, that joke which is the secret of all folklore and myth: that though we be dismembered daily we shall always rise up again. Americans have long found in Spanish culture a clarifying perspective on their own. Now in this anthology of Spanish folklore we have a most inviting challenge to listen more attentively to the deeper voice of our own.

“TELL IT LIKE IT IS, BABY”

Mostly written in Rome in 1956 in response to a letter from Virgil Brannam, Ellison's friend since boyhood in Oklahoma City, this essay was not nished until 1965. Angry at the "Southern Congressmen's de ance of the Supreme Court," Ellison struggles to articulate the connections he feels and dreams between the loss of his father and the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln, the Gettysburg Address, and his pursuit of eloquence as a writer. It was published in the hundredth-anniversary issue of The Nation, *September 20, 1965*.

Dear Uncle Raf:

…What are you doing over there in Rome with all those Italians? What do you think about over there? Are you keeping up with what's happening here at home? Have you read about those cracker senators cussing out the Supreme Court and all that mess? Let me hear what a home-boy done gone intellectual thinks when he's away from the Apple and all the righteous studs.… How's the writing going? Do you nd it makes a di erence being over there? Tell a man how it is.…

Virgil B., who wrote the above excerpt in 1956 after the Southern Congressmen had drawn up their manifesto against the Supreme Court, is a childhood friend who is now a cook and baker on merchant ships. Inevitably his letters contain a trace of mockery, directed at my odd metamorphosis into a writer, which is meant to remind me whence I come. Nor is he merely amused; he seriously expects insight and eloquence and a certain quality of attention to the reality experienced by our group—demands which, since that experience is often ba ingly complex, I am not always able to meet.

After answering his letter, however, I was led to make an attempt at an essay which, perhaps because too many things were happening to me at the time, I was unable to complete. My wife and I were living the dormitory life of the American Academy in Rome and I was much preoccupied: with writing a novel, with literary concepts, with reviewing my own life's resources for literary creation; with the experience of discovering a foreign culture in which the old structures and guides that sustained my thoughts, emotions and conduct at home were so relaxed, whether awake or sleeping, that it was as though I was living in a barely controlled chaos.

So the essay failed. I simply could not organize the various elements—literary, political, psychological, personal—into the complex, meaningful whole which my sense of reality and my concern with ction demanded. But I could not forget the essay, or at least not the dream which was its core; for in its way it seemed to symbolize my state of di usion, my concerns, conscious and unconscious. Therefore the following attempt at salvage (made at

the suggestion of the late David Boro) represents, if nothing more, a further episode in my discovery that for me it was by no means a simple task to "tell it like it is"—even when the subject was desegregation and the Southern Congressmen's de ance of the Supreme Court. I was outraged and angered by the event, but the anger was not isolated or shallowly focused, rather it su used my most nonpolitical preoccupations. More unsettling, I discovered that there lay deeply within me a great deal of the horror generated by the Civil War and the tragic incident which marked the reversal of the North's "victory," and which foreshadowed the tenor of the ninety years to follow.

Since I attempted the essay, some nine years ago now, the power of the Southern Congressmen has been broken and the reconstruction of the South is once more under way. Nevertheless, the hooded horrors parading, murdering and shouting de ance in the South today suggest that the psychic forces with which I tried to deal (in both dream and essay) are still there to be dispersed or humanized; the individual white Southerner's task of reconciling himself to the new political reality remains. In retrospect, then, it was perhaps not too naïve after all to have tried to approach the problem consciously through the insights made available by the wisdom of tragedy. One thing is certain, the mind in sleep will have its way, and I *had* fallen asleep while reading Gilbert Murray's *The Classical Tradition in Poetry*, puzzling over how its insights might possibly be useful to a writer who is American, a Negro, and most eager to discover a more artful, more broadly signi cant approach to those centers of stress within our national life wherein he nds his task and being.

—New York, June 1965

Let me begin with a personal dream—for with what are we concerned, the moment we try to think about the problem of desegregation, but the clash between the American dream and everyday American reality; between the ideal of equality and the actuality of our society in which social, educational, and economic inequalities are enforced explicitly on the irremediable ground of

race? And even in so practical and (until recently) so far removed an area as that of foreign policy, does not this clash, especially when we regard Asia and Africa, make for an atmosphere of dreamlike irrationality?

Perhaps more to the point, when a Negro American novelist tries to write about desegregation he must regard, in all its tortuous ambiguity, the South. And here immediately he confronts three clusters of con icting images: the myth-image propagated by orthodox White Southern spokesmen, by costume movies and popular novels of the Civil War; the image, almost completely negative, held by self-righteous white Northerners—and not a few Negroes—who have never known the South; and the more heavily quali ed image (far more than a simple synthesis of the others) held by his black Southern relatives and their fellow Negroes. Among these images (none absolutely true or false) there is a great clashing, with the exponents of each set making scapegoats of the others: Northerners for Southerners, the South for the North, the black for the white and the white for the black, and when we try to nd stable points of reality in this whirling nightmare of terms and attitudes, they change constantly into their opposites.

If we honestly say “Southerner,” then we must, since most Negroes are *also* Southerners, immediately add *white* Southerner. If we say “white South” our recognition that the “white South” is far from solid compels us to specify *which* white South we mean. And so on for the North and for the Negro until even the word

“democracy”—the ground-term of our concept of justice, the basis of our scheme of social rationality, the rock upon which our society was built—changes into its opposite, depending upon who is using it, upon his color, racial identity, the section of the country in which he happened to have been born, or where and with whom he happens to be at the moment of utterance. These circumstances have, for me at least, all of the elements of a social

nightmare, a state of *civil* war, an impersonal and dreamlike chaos. To what then, and in his own terms, does a Negro writer turn when confronting such chaos—to politics, history, sociology, anthropology, art? War,

it has been said, is a hellish state; so, too, is equivocation, that state (born of the Hayes-Tilden Compromise of 1877 and faintly illumined by the candle of liberty) in which we live. It is the candle alone which guides us through our chaos and when the candle ickers we're in the dark. And so in the Roman dark I dreamed.

It was a bright spring morning and I was walking along Classen Boulevard in Oklahoma City. Birds sang high in the trees that lined the walk and I could see the ash of wings and the quick, downward swoop ending in a nervous run along the walk, where, with alerted heads and ipping tails, they busily harvested a horde of catalpa worms. The worms were everywhere, the walk smeared green and white with their pulp and skin. But they were relentless. They kept dropping from the trees to the walk and moving over the curb and into the street in a steady wave, providing an ambulatory feast for the birds. Trying to avoid both worms and smears, I moved past the well-trimmed walks that led through handsome lawns to the distant houses, showing bright and gay with awnings. There were owers too, and a clarinet running arpeggios in middle register, and the call of a huckster sounding hoarse-voiced in the limpid distance. I was lled with the expectation of some pleasantness, some long looked-for reward. Then it came over me that I was going to see my father.

I hurried now and almost immediately I saw in the distance under the high archway of worm-damaged leaves a tall, familiar man coming toward me. We were approaching an intersection, which he reached ahead of me, and stood looking steadily toward me and I felt a certain joy.

But then, as I drew closer, he was no longer familiar, but a stranger wearing a dull black and gray diamond-checked suit, his face narrow as he watched me out of small, staring eyes. I didn't know him at all, was even uncertain of his race. Standing quite still now, feeling a cold sensation along the ridge of my spine, I looked across the empty street, trying to interpret his accusatory look. We stared for a breathless time, then he turned away,

retreating quickly beyond a privet hedge and out of sight, just as a mirror or window pane nearby sent the sun glaring into my eyes. It was odd.

I moved again, feeling now as though I had lost something precious. Who was this man, and what was the meaning of his staring accusation? What had I done—what had I failed to do? Had I been mistaken for someone else? But who?

The weather had changed and the city become strange. I was walking through an arcade lined with shops and on into an old streetcar terminal covered with dirty glass through which the light ltered gloomily down. Passengers stood about in little groups, silently waiting for the long, yellow cars that came and went with a groaning and grinding, the motormen retracting and shifting the trolley poles with a great showering of sparks. An old man in a white apron and yellow paper cap was selling popcorn and peanuts from a stand topped by a whistle which sent forth a thin plume of steam each time a little mechanical clown, wearing a white, polka-dotted suit and peaked hat with a red pompon, turned the crank of a glass drum containing unshelled peanuts. The man smiled, holding out a paper cone of popcorn, gleaming with butter, as I moved past and out into a great public square, in the center of which I saw a tall, equestrian statue standing level with the second story of the surrounding buildings. The rider, poised in full gallop, stood high in the stirrups ourishing a broad military hat with plume. An expression of victory showed on his bronze face, despite the fact that his saber had lost three-fourths of its blade. Gazing upward past his head, I saw on the balcony of a building across the square the man who had stared; now, accompanied by a mysterious woman, he was looking toward me. They leaned forward, gripping the rail, staring at me intensely. Then a clock struck three with a mournful sound, followed by the creaking of cogs and pendulum—an ancient, dirty, cobwebbed sound. Then a ock of pigeons ew up, casting a shadow between us as they rustled the light with their wings and a voice spoke from a hidden loudspeaker.

“Is he the one?” it said.

“He’s the one,” a woman’s voice answered, “truly.”

“Is he the one? I say is he the *one*!”

“He’s young, too young; he’s not the one. It’s been too long.”

“Then he’s the one,” the male voice said. “Strength is not a requirement.”

Then I became aware of a crowd standing behind me, before a building decorated with ags and bunting. It was quite hostile and I had the hot feeling that it was capable of almost anything. I moved away, aware that the crowd was following and feeling that somehow I had fallen from a high place, from a cli or high protecting wall; and now I was running down a hill on which the tracks of a trolley line gleamed, and the air, suddenly breathless, was portentous.

I ran desperately, until, somehow, I was in a dark, colonial alley in Washington. And as I emerged into a crowded thoroughfare it was as though a book of nineteenth-century photographs had erupted into vivid life. The street was full of rubber-tired carriages—

broughams, phaetons, landaus—and I could hear the creak-snap-jangle and thud of wall-eyed pacing horses. Gas lamps ickered the shadows with a chill white light, revealing a relentless crowd moving with sweating excitement, and as I moved out into the crush I became aware of the strangely sinister, high-frequency swishing of women’s skirts. All around me people were rushing swiftly past to gather before a building from which, looking past their bobbing heads, I could see a sheet-covered form being removed on a litter.

It was a man, I could see now, his body having lost its covering as his litter-bearers jolted him roughly about. It was a tall man who seemed familiar: there was something about the way the disarranged sheet draped the toes of his shoes. Then it was now and yet another time, and I moved forward with a feeling of dread, thinking, “It’s happening again.”

We had said good-by and he had made me a present of the tiny pink and yellow wild owers that had stood in the vase on the window sill, had put a blue corn ower in my lapel. Then a nurse and two attendants had wheeled in the table and put him on it. He was quite tall and I could see the pain in his face as they moved him. But when they got him covered his feet made little tents of the sheet and he made me a joke about it, just as he had many

times before. He smiled then and said good-by once more, and I had watched, holding on to the cold white

metal of the hospital bed as they wheeled him away. The white door closed quietly and I just stood there, looking at nothing at all. Nearby I could hear my mother talking quietly with the physician. He was explaining and she was asking questions. They didn't talk long, and when they nished we went out of the room for the last time. Holding on to my wrist as I clutched my owers in my st, my mother led me down the silent corridor heavy with the fumes of chloroform. She hurried me along. Ahead of us I saw a door swing ajar and watched it, but no one came out, then as we passed I looked inside to see him, lying in a great tub-like basin, waiting to be prepared for his last surgery. I could see his long legs, his knees propped up and his toes exing as he rested there with his arms folded over his chest, looking at me quite calmly, like a kindly king in his bath. I had only a glimpse, then we were past. We had taken the elevator then and the nurse had allowed me to hold the control and she had laughed and talked with me as we went down to the street.

Outside, as we moved along the winding drive into the blazing sun, I had told my mother but she wouldn't believe that I had seen him. I had though, and he had looked at me and smiled. It was the last time I saw my father alive. Years later, while telling me who he was and what he had been and what it meant to be his fatherless child, my mother had said that di culties with money and the weather caused his body to be withheld from burial until it stank in the dark back room of the funeral parlor. Such was her respect for the naked reality of the human condition.… But what quality of love sustains us in our orphan's loneliness; and how much is thus required of fatherly love to give us strength for all our life thereafter? And what statistics, what lines on whose graphs can ever convince me that by his death I was fatally awed and doomed—afraid of women, derelict of duty, sad in the sack, cold in the crotch, a rolling stone in social space, a spiritual delinquent, a hater of self—me in whose face his image shows? My mother loved him through all the years, cherished his memory until she died, apotheosized his vital years. For in e ect he only perished, he did not pass away. His strength became my mother's strength and my brother and I the

confused, sometimes bitter, but most often proud, recipients of their values and their love.…

But as I moved closer now it was Washington again and I could see the man's head snap suddenly back to reveal a short, carefully trimmed beard and I was confused, thinking: *But he didn't wear a beard*. As I pressed forward to get a better look, the crowd came between and I thought: *He's either drunk or sick—but why aren't they more careful?* Some were even laughing.

"What are they laughing at?" I asked a man going past.

"At our American cousin, fool."

"What? Whose—"

Then there came over me an inexpressible anguish, like a great weight suspended on a blunt hook driven through that part of my throat, the region of the thyroid gland, where grief and anguish collect, bearing down like doom.

For now, looking at the balustraded steps I recognized the building, and recognizing the building I knew the man; and knowing the man I wanted to cry, but could not cry. I wanted to scream, but could not scream. And suddenly the air resounded with the obscene melodramatics of the assassin's *"Sic semper tyrannis!"*

and the night was lled with a great weeping and a great laughter.

And yet I was still unsure.

"What are they laughing at?" I said.

"Are you kidding, boy?" came the reply. "Face the facts!"

I knew now, even in the dream, that I had fallen out of time into chaos, and although the sight of the body lled me with horror, there was still room for personal embarrassment. And an embarrassment over the embarrassment—a chattering, degenerating echo of vanity before sad public events. For

suddenly I discovered that I, whose grandparents were quite young at the time of Emancipation, had become a child again and was dressed in the one-piece garment of a young slave. I had no pants, nor shoes nor underwear; and when I tried in my dual shame to leave the street I was swept forward by the crowd, forced to follow after the litter which was now being moved along the street in what had suddenly become a funeral cortege. And now, though barefoot and quite

young, I discovered that nevertheless I was literate, a slave who could read.

For as I was swept along, history-book descriptions of the event ickered through my mind in visual counterpoint and I kept trying to anticipate the route which the crowd would take through the dim and shadowed streets. But nothing was going as it was written.

Instead of an escort of grieving high dignitaries, military men and weeping gentlewomen following a ag-draped camion, and with a crowd of weeping, recently freed slaves forming an anguished second line (perhaps the archetype of all such lines, joyful or sad, associated today with their descendants), the slain man, lanky and not yet cold, the complexion darker than I'd ever imagined, and with an ironic yet benign expression on the transcendent features, was being conveyed by a mob.

In a ash it became a carnival, an *Oktoberfest*, a Mardi Gras, with the corpse become the butt of obscene jokes. In the light of the hissing street lamps I saw a burly, bald-headed man waving his arms about, announcing in stentorian tones, "We've caught the old coon at last! Haven't we now!" Then as he broke into a t of wheezing laughter the others responded, "COON! COON! COON! Hep-hep-Hep-john-step COON-COON!" And it quickly became a wild marching chant that lled me with a special terror. For hearing this epithet applied to the slain leader warned me that something terrible was about to occur, that some further support was to be torn from the foundation of that which I had thought was reality, from that which I held most sacred.

And how can I be me, if Old Abe be a "coon," I thought. *Yes, and how can I be a slave or even human?* And I looked down at my hands, fully prepared to see them turn into hairy paws.

Just then I saw a squat man with a toothbrush mustache shoot out of the crowd ashing a knife in the lamplight, yelling, “Make way!

Make way!”

Please, not that, please not that! I thought, striking out about me as he bent low over the litter, the knife poised. Then I was spun around and when I looked again, he held a black piece of cloth, a wedge-

shaped lapel, its lining gutted, yelling, “Hey! For my grandbaby boy, a souvenir for little Joey!” And this triggered the mob to a frenzy.

They rushed in to rip at the black coat with their ngers, they hacked it with pieces of broken bottle. One elegant man produced a straight-edged razor from the folds of his rich purple cravat and went to work distributing delicate bits of cloth among those unable to share directly in the dismemberment. Bits of cloth ittered down like blackened snow. And the coat swiftly disappearing, they went to work on his trousers.

Someone tugged o a homely gaiter. I saw several men and women, squawking like carrion crows, close in, ghting to take it away. A bent little old woman wearing a poke bonnet like that of the “Old Dutch Cleanser” woman grabbed the gaiter’s mate and disappeared. Two small boys snatched o the socks, slashing them to shreds between them with nails astonishingly sharp.

They were insatiable. They ripped up the slain Lincoln’s tie. His collar was seized, his white shirt ripped away, his vest torn to surreal tatters.

“Peace, Peace,” a thin voice cried. “Remember the old buzzard’s advice to its young: Hit a deadhead-horse in the eye and move straight up through his vastness. I say: Remember, Find the place, Strike!”

This enthusiastic *elegante* in Edwardian suit and with suave Eliotonian stoop was knocked aside by a rough-looking man who produced the President’s stovepipe hat, and I saw him sail it curving through the air and into a second-story window—in which a wrathful woman promptly appeared and sailed it down again, dusting her hands indignantly as the high

hat hovered above us like a battered Saturn with its radiant rings turned gray. A man grabbed it as it fell and, turning on his toes like a ballet dancer, jammed it on the head of a oozy, cotton-topped blonde, who wiggling wobbly a few steps, shook her head of cotton-candy hair to the crowd's applause. She wore a feather boa and a skintight satin dress, and ouncing about on unsteady legs she showed o a pair of monstrous, heavily powdered breasts which, as she stumbled and lurched on shoes with vicious heels, kept ipping out of her low-cut

bodice and tossing about like two bloated, moon-mad, oxygen-starved ounders. For a tful moment she caught the crowd's attention by cutting a clumsy cake-walk as she waved the hat and weaved, singing in a tinny little-lost-girl voice, *Come on boys*

And name your play

We put the last clean shirt

On Abe today…,

punctuated with a suggestion of bump and grind.

We moved again, the crowd growing with every step, the heat oppressive, the noise expanding in hysterical volume. Suddenly I noticed that the body was now being carried by four ragged Negro men who, kicked and pummeled as they stumbled along, held grimly to their burden, their stolid black faces disapproving.

"Get on. Get on!" the crowd cried. But hardly had they gone a dozen feet than they were beaten to a halt and rested the litter high on their shoulders while the crowd jeered at the slain President. He lay now in his underwear, his bony railsplitter's wrists hanging awkward and bare, his thin ankles sticking from the bottom of his underdrawers much as the rapidly growing Uncle Sam of the nineteenth-century cartoons had stuck from his outgrown heel-strapped britches.

"Stars, stripes and nigger minstrels!" someone called. "Now he's Happy Hooligan!" At which, to the crowd's wild delight, a short, fat man wearing

a long, gray coat, and who resembled Edmund Wilson, turned from drinking beer from a tin bucket and shook his head as with sudden revelation. Taking a nal sip, he dashed the remains into the street and with an inspired, slow-mushrooming belch, jammed the “growler” on the Great Emancipator’s head, clamping the wire handle beneath the bearded chin.

“Beautiful,” someone said. “Beautiful!”

The applause was like the shattering of great sheets of glass.

Whereupon the inspired fat man completed the Happy Hooligan transformation by pushing the stem of a corncob pipe between the

once so eloquent lips, twisting the bowl so that its contents spilled upon the shrunken chest. Then a group of men labored up with a railway baggage wagon and the Negroes were forced to put the body upon it and then made to pull it through the cursing, ailing crowd.

“Push dat barge, boys!” a joker commanded in a thick foreign accent. “Push dat dar ole cotton-picking barge!”

I wanted to kill him along with all the callous crowd, but was too powerless *and* too fascinated, too held by horror and the anguished need to see it ended.

We were rushing through wide streets now, with broad lawns and stately buildings on either side. The ragged Negroes strained away, conveying now, beside the President, a number of women in tacky Sunday dresses, whose high-laced shoes dangled contentedly as they uttered beside the body, joking and laughing and plying their little lace, mother-of-pearl-embellished fans. Then straight ahead I saw the Washington Monument, seeming to break through the oor of a barren plain like a periscope from the sea, rushing to meet us. Then we were there, at the base of the austere shaft, where the four Negroes were again beaten to a halt and made to lay their burden on the grass, then sent eeing into the darkness. I tried to follow them, but was quickly restrained.

But why not me, I thought. *Why not me as well?* For I wished to join them in their forced detachment, I envied them their anonymity, their freedom to *not* participate. But my brown skin and slave's garment notwithstanding, I was held and forced to the front of the crowd.

I found myself standing near a tall, thin grandame who was laughing hysterically, screaming like a great tropical bird. Then she stopped and sni ed solemnly at a bottle of smelling salts, an expression of utmost complacency settling over her thin, aristocratic face, while the others joked, cursed, and made obscene remarks about the President until abruptly the composure of her face broke apart like the shattering of rock, and she laughed to put my teeth on edge. She bent double, then back, her sti black garments snapping

visibly with the motion and enveloping me in the rank fumes of female senility laced with threat and mystery.

Squeezing around her, and against an invisible hand that now seemed to hold me, I looked down at the lanky gure sprawled at the base of the marble shaft, thinking, *Now it's all over, they'll leave him alone, it's over*.

But not yet. I looked up to see a man wearing a voluminous opera cape, and who looked oddly like Mr. Justice Holmes, skipping slowly forward, decorous and tall, and with the toe of his elegant high-button shoe, ipping the corpse into a grotesque attitude.

Then, throwing open his cape, he shouted, "Look at these! I say, *look at these!"* sticking a long nger through a series of bullet holes.

"Poor noble man!" they cried. "Poor betrayed innocent!"

"That dirty coon!"

"He did him wrong, the clod! He swindled him!"

"He wasted his land! He spoiled the cream! Get him!" This initiated a contest. Now they pushed one another about as they tried to see who could kick the corpse into the most fantastic positions, standing it on its head,

doubling it over, twisting it in the cordwood postures of Dachau, shouting and cursing all the while.

“He’s all to blame!”

“Give it to him good. There, there, how about that!”

“Yeah, but now you just watch this.”

“That was a good one!”

“Look at ole Abe, he’s dead but he won’t lie down!”

“Watch it there, McDu y, turn him over easy—but turn him!” I wanted to cry, my throat feeling as though it would burst apart, but no tears would ow to bring relief.

I closed my eyes as they knocked me about. And I now realized an odd thing. Up to this point, such is the contradiction of the dream, that I had not felt the President was actually dead. He isn’t dead: I wouldn’t have it so. It was a pitiful denial born of horror, a wish born of an anguished need to deny the hegemony of terrible fact—

an attitude with which I had been familiar since childhood, when I had been bemused by a recurring fantasy in which, on my way to

school of a late winter day I would emerge from a cold side street into the warm spring sun and there see my father, dead since I was three, rushing toward me with a smile of recognition and outstretched arms. And I would run proudly to greet him, his son grown tall. And then I could awake at last from the tortuous and extended dream that was my childhood with my father gone. So urgent had been my need for a sense of familial completeness, to have our family whole and happy as it had been until shortly before I saw him placed at last into the earth, that this thin fantasy had been made to serve for the man of esh and blood, the man of the tales, the ghost stories, the gifts and strength and love. From the age of three to thirteen, the processes of time and the cold facts of death alike were—in

this special area of my mind, for I *understood* death and was eager for change and for my own manhood's attainment—

held o by this recurring daydream.

So I could not believe Mr. Lincoln dead. Thus, in the dislocated, is-and-isn't world of dream, I felt that the President bore his indignities out of a temporary weakness incurred by his wound or out of war weariness—even out of a saint-like patience, out of a hero's grace before the mob's wild human need. It was as though the noisy desecration of his body was being accepted as he had accepted the tragic duty of keeping the country uni ed even through an act of fratricidal war. Or as later it had been his task to seek reconciliation of the sundered parts. Yes, it was no less an act of duty than that of receiving the assassin's bullet in his brain. He is not dead, I told myself in the dream; he is not tolerating the mob's outrages out of the insensitivity of death, but submitting willingly to them out of the most sublime and tragic awareness of the requirements of his fated role. For we must take our heroes where we nd them, and in all their wisdom and their guile, and in all their frustrating enigmas as in their bright lucidities.

For in him at least, there was a man who, having taken the oath, would do, and did, all that it was necessary for him to do, even before his own foreboding dream of obliteration.

But now in the suddenly accelerated tempo of the dream the corpse rebelled. I saw it grow rigid, then swell, transformed before

my eyes into an advanced state of putrefaction. So in ated was the corpse becoming that soon the underwear resembled the series of inner tubes that form the body of the gure in the Michelin trademark. Death undeniable looked out at me, the sublime mocking its earthly shell.

"Now it is over," I thought. "At last they can see what they've done and I'll awaken."

But not even the ultimate protest of decomposing esh could halt them. A man reached down and grasped the in ated underwear, trying to tear it away —and it was then that a sound like a fusillade of shots ripped the air and a

dense cloud of gray, slime-drenched birds burst up from the earth on swift metallic wings and attacked the onlookers with feet of re.

Screaming with pain, they burst apart like an exploding grenade, turning to claw at one another as they milled wildly about. And in the confusion I was pinned against the monument, burned by the ying slime. The four Negroes had returned now, and they stood silently, looking rst at me and then down at Mr. Lincoln. They grasped with one hand the handles of a black box; in their free hands they carried gleaming spades. There was some cryptic exchange among them, then they looked at me, and now I was no longer a child. The scene became a scene on a movie screen, which I was watching from a distance and with a feeling of utmost clarity, as though I grasped the mystery of all experience. Then, just as suddenly, I was in the scene again, only now the mysterious Negroes were resting on their spades around a great hole. They motioned for me to look over the edge. Approaching fearfully, I looked down, seeing the crowd transported there, a multitude, some black faces among them, sitting at table making a ghoulish meal of some frightful thing that a white sheet hid from view. Then as I saw something stirring and expanding beneath the sheet, the earth seemed to crumble, plunging me screaming into a terrible wakefulness.…

I lay there in the hushed Roman night, aware of a nightingale singing somewhere beyond the Venetian blinds, the lonely play of

the fountain in the gravel-strewn *cortile* below. The air was breathlessly hot, yet I lay in a cold sweat, trying now, by way of exorcizing the dream, to recall some of Mr. Lincoln’s eloquent words

—grasping desperately for the Gettysburg Address. I had known it most of my life, had been moved by it even before its implications had become meaningful; had memorized its stately lines as a class assignment back in an old high school named Frederick Douglass; had studied it on my own in Sherwin Cody’s little booklet on composition and rhetoric, where it was grouped with passages from Ecclesiastes and Benjamin Franklin; had pondered its themes of sectional reconciliation and national rebirth many times long since, as the awareness grew that there was little about it that was simple and that it was profoundly implicated both in my life and in the failure of my promised freedom.

But now, although I could feel the mood of its noble rhythms as physically as the pounding of my heart, the words had hidden themselves, become mute before the vivid mist of nightmare. I sat up abruptly, seeing the dim bars of moonlight seeping through the blinds as the rhythms called forth a swirl of imagery. Then scenes of Charles Laughton performing the title role of the movie *Ruggles of Red Gap* suddenly reeled through my mind. Once more he was the much put-upon immigrant English butler, enduring the jibes and abuses of his *nouveau riche* American employers, whose vulgar

"Gilded Age" materialism mocked all that is ideal in the American tradition. And once more, at the high point, he drew himself up proudly to recite the compassionate words uttered by Lincoln at Gettysburg, becoming in their measured ow transformed into a most resonant image of the American's post-Civil War imperative of conscience and consciousness achieved.

So here at last, in remembered art, the words of hope and reconciliation born of war and bloodshed rejoined the hallowed rhythms to dispel the nightmare images of the great man de led. I was, though badly shaken, at last awakened.

Thank God it was only a dream! But as I became more fully awake it struck me that more dismaying than having such events erupt in

one's dream life was that no living hero or surrogate had appeared to play Anthony to Lincoln's Caesar. Even the villains were less than individualized, the gure who looked like Mr. Justice Holmes only resembling him and the man in the long gray coat only *looking* like Mr. Edmund Wilson (but with no aura of scholarly eminence). And so the women. None struck me as mother-gures, neither the rump-sprung blonde, the poke-bonneted granny, nor the tall boom-and-bust gure in the sti black dress—though I'm sure that some critic expert in the interior life of writers could write a fascinating essay on these ladies as three phases of the same personage—say: "The Woman as Earth-Mother, as Matron, and as Scold." Seriously, I could not ignore the fact that no one tried to stop the mob, nor that I myself was but a trapped and impotent observer—in fact, most infantile, my mind become an incongruous scene for historical horrors horribly personalized.

But enough, let me not pretend objectivity; my dream, being a dream, was absurd. For how else describe its mixture of obscene, historical and mythical elements? During the bright Roman day I had read my friend's questioning letter, and at night had fallen asleep reading Gilbert Murray's chapter on "Hamlet and Orestes,"

which here would seem to shed no light at all. Yet this immediately suggests, whatever its Freudian implications, a possible relationship between my dream and a pattern of classical tragedy: the hero-father murdered (for Lincoln *is* a kind of father of twentieth-century America), his life evilly sacri ced and the fruits of his neglected labors withering some ninety years in the elds; the state fallen into corruption, and the citizens into moral anarchy, with no hero come to set things right. Perhaps this is too far-fetched, but when living abroad one is compelled to look homeward through one's own inner eyes and through the objectives that lie at hand. Perhaps, therefore

—any lens being better than no lens at all—the present optics provided by Murray's essay on tragedy will serve without too much distortion when we consider the possibility that the last true note of tragedy was sounded (and quickly mu ed) in our land when the North buried Lincoln and the South buried Lee, and between them

cast the better part, both of our tragic sense—except perhaps the Negroes'—and our capacity for tragic heroism into the grave. On the national scale, at least, this seems true. The sheet-covered gure in my dream might well have been General Robert E. Lee.

So I confess defeat; it is too complex for me to "tell it like it is." I can only suggest that here at least is how the Southern Congressmen's de ance of the Supreme Court joined with matters which bemused my writer's waking mind in Rome; this is how the incident "dreamed." For a writer who depends upon the imagination for his insights and his judgments, perhaps this is usually the way.

Current events and events from the past, both personal and historical, ever collide within his interior life—either to be jumbled in the chaos of dream, or brought to ordered signi cance through the forms and techniques of his

art. Following my defeat with the essay, I returned to my novel—which, by the way, has as its central incident the assassination of a Senator.

Rome, 1956

New York, 1965

SHADOW AND ACT

P*ublished in 1964, Ellison's rst book of essays contains an eclectic selection of essays, addresses, reviews, and interviews written from 1942 to 1964.*

Oklahoma, music and the vernacular, the mysterious inheritance of his name, his discovery of literature and emergence as a writer, the complexities of Negro identity, the contradictions of democracy: Ellison essays these themes in Shadow and Act *as, with the continuing impact of* Invisible Man, *he becomes more and more consciously an American man of letters*.

Introduction

WHEN the rst of these essays was published I regarded myself—in my most secret heart at least—a musician. This was the result, in part, of a complicated, semiconscious strategy of self-deception, a refusal by my right hand to recognize where my left hand was headed. Actually I had been devoting as much time and energy to reading and writing as to music, and was passionately engaged, night and noon, in acquiring the basic knowledge and skills of the novelist. Thus the earliest, most agonizingly written pieces presented here (none has been retouched) were the results of a crucial con ict raging deep within me, the products of an activity, dreamlike yet intense, which was waxing on the dark side of my mind and assuming even then a major importance in shaping my life. In this sense, writing was an acting out, symbolically, of a choice which I dared not acknowledge. Indeed, I repressed it beneath my old concern with music and my current involvement in the intense social and political activity which claimed so many of us who came of age during the thirties.

One might say that with these thin essays for wings I was launched full ight into the dark.

At stake here, beyond the veil of consciousness, was the question of what seemed possible for me in terms of self-achievement, and linked to this was the question of what was the most desirable agency for de ning myself. Writing provided me a growing satisfaction and required, unlike music, no formal study—but the designation “writer” seemed to me most unreal. Not only this, for despite the naïveté of my involvement with literature—and ignoring the crucial question of talent—my standards were impossibly high.

Therefore, the chances of my producing anything of quality seemed nonexistent. Besides, I still believed that my real self was destined to be ful lled in music, that art which had focused my ambitions from

the age of eight and the only art, given my background, that seemed to o er some possibility for self-de nition. Obviously I was still quite young and, fortunately, still given to play and adventure.

For in the beginning writing was far from a serious matter; it was playing with the secret lore of a fascinating but less glorious art to which I owed, I believed, no prior dedication. (It would be many years before I was to learn of my father’s hope that I would become a poet.) Nor had I invested in writing any long hours of practice and study. Rather it was a re ex of reading, an extension of a source of pleasure, escape and instruction. In fact, I had become curious about writing by way of seeking to understand the aesthetic nature of literary power, the devices through which literature could command my mind and emotions. It was not, then, the *process* of writing which initially claimed my attention, but the nished creations, the artifacts—poems, plays, novels. The act of learning writing technique was, therefore, an amusing investigation of what seemed at best a secondary talent, an exploration, like dabbling in sculpture, of one’s potentialities as a “Renaissance man.” This, surely, would seem a most unlikely and even comic concept to introduce here, and yet it is precisely because I come from where I do (the Oklahoma of the years between World War I and the Great Depression) that I must introduce it, and with a straight face.

Anything and everything was to be found in the chaos of Oklahoma; thus the concept of the Renaissance man has lurked long within the shadow of my past, and I shared it with at least a half dozen of my Negro friends. How we actually acquired it I have never learned, and since there is no true sociology of the dispersion of ideas within the American democracy, I doubt if I ever shall.

Perhaps we breathed it in with the air of the Negro community of Oklahoma City, the capital of that state whose Negroes were often charged by exasperated white Texans with “not knowing their place.” Perhaps we took it de antly from one of them. Or perhaps I myself picked it up from some transplanted New Englander whose shoes I had shined of a Saturday afternoon. After all, the most meaningful tips do not always come in the form of money, nor are they intentionally extended. Most likely, however, my friends and I

acquired the idea from some book or from some idealistic Negro teacher, some dreamer seeking to function responsibly in an environment which at its most normal took on some of the mixed character of nightmare and of dream.

One thing is certain; ours was a chaotic community, still characterized by frontier attitudes and by that strange mixture of the naïve and sophisticated, the benign and malignant, which makes the American past so puzzling and its present so confusing; that mixture which often a ords the minds of the young who grow up in the far provinces such wide and unstructured latitude, and which encourages the individual’s imagination—up to the moment

“reality” closes in upon him—to range widely and sometimes even to soar.

We hear the e ects of this in the southwestern jazz of the thirties, that joint creation of artistically free and exuberantly creative adventurers, of artists who had stumbled upon the freedom lying within the restrictions of their musical tradition as within the limitations of their social background, and who in their own unconscious way have set an example for any Americans, Negro or white, who would nd themselves in the arts. They accepted themselves and the complexity of life as they knew it; they loved their art

and through it they celebrated American experience de nitively in sound. Whatever others thought or felt, this was their own powerful statement, and only nonmusical assaults upon their artistic integrity—mainly economically inspired changes of fashion

—were able to compromise their vision.

Several of the essays deal with jazz, and it is perhaps pardonable if I recall that much of so-called Kansas City jazz was actually brought to perfection in Oklahoma by Oklahomans. It is an important circumstance for me as a writer to remember, because while these musicians and their fellows were busy creating out of tradition, imagination and the sounds and emotions around them a freer, more complex and driving form of jazz, my friends and I were exploring an idea of human versatility and possibility which went against the barbs or over the palings of almost every fence which those who controlled social and political power had erected to

restrict our roles in the life of the country. Looking back, one might say that the jazzmen, some of whom we idolized, were in their own way better examples for youth to follow than were most judges and ministers, legislators and governors (we were stuck with the notorious Alfalfa Bill Murray). For as we viewed these pillars of society from the con nes of our segregated community we almost always saw crooks, clowns or hypocrites. Even the best were revealed by their attitudes toward us as lacking the respectable qualities to which they pretended and for which they were accepted outside by others, while despite the outlaw nature of their art, the jazzmen were less torn and damaged by the moral compromises and insincerities which have so sickened the life of our country.

Be that as it may, our youthful sense of life, like that of many Negro children (though no one bothers to note it—especially the specialists and “friends of the Negro” who view our Negro American life as essentially nonhuman) was very much like that of Huckleberry Finn, who is universally so praised and enjoyed for the clarity and courage of his moral vision. Like Huck, we observed, we judged, we imitated and evaded as we could the dullness, corruption and blindness of “civilization.” We were undoubtedly comic because, as the saying goes, we weren’t supposed to know what it was all about. But to ourselves we were “boys,” members of a

wild, free, outlaw tribe which transcended the category of race. Rather we were Americans born into the forty-sixth state, and thus, into the context of Negro-American post-Civil War history, “frontiersmen.”

And isn’t one of the implicit functions of the American frontier to encourage the individual to a kind of dreamy wakefulness, a state in which he makes—in all ignorance of the accepted limitations of the possible—rash e orts, quixotic gestures, hopeful testings of the complexity of the known and the given?

Spurring us on in our controlled and benign madness was the voracious reading of which most of us were guilty, and the vicarious identi cation and empathic adventuring which it encouraged. This was due, in part, perhaps to the fact that some of us were fatherless

—my own father had died when I was three—but most likely it was because boys are natural romantics. We were seeking examples,

patterns to live by, out of a freedom which for all its neglect by the sociologists and subtle thinkers was implicit in the Negro situation.

Father and mother substitutes also have a role to play in aiding the child to help create himself. Thus we fabricated our own heroes and ideals catch-as-catch-can, and with an outrageous and irreverent sense of freedom. Yes, and in complete disregard for ideas of respectability or the surreal incongruity of some of our projections.

Gamblers and scholars, jazz musicians and scientists, Negro cowboys and soldiers from the Spanish-American and rst world wars, movie stars and stunt men, gures from the Italian Renaissance and literature, both classical and popular, were combined with the special virtues of some local bootlegger, the eloquence of some Negro preacher, the strength and grace of some local athlete, the ruthlessness of some businessman-physician, the elegance in dress and manners of some headwaiter or hotel doorman.

Looking back through the shadows upon this absurd activity, I realize now that we were projecting archetypes, recreating folk gures, legendary heroes, monsters even, most of which violated all ideas of social hierarchy and

order and all accepted conceptions of the hero handed down by cultural, religious and racist tradition. But we, remember, were under the intense spell of the early movies, the silents as well as the talkies, and in our community, life was not so tightly structured as it would have been in the traditional South—or even in deceptively "free" Harlem. And our imaginations processed reality and dream, natural man and traditional hero, literature and folklore, like maniacal editors turned loose in some frantic lm-cutting room. Remember, too, that being boys, yet in the play stage of our development, we were dream-serious in our e orts. But serious, nevertheless, for *culturally* play is a preparation, and we felt that somehow the human ideal lay in the vague and constantly shirting gures—sometimes comic but always versatile, picaresque and self-e acingly heroic—which evolved from our wildly improvisionary projections, gures neither white nor black, Christian nor Jewish, but representative of certain desirable essences, of skills and powers physical, aesthetic and moral.

The proper response to these gures was, we felt, to develop ourselves for the performance of many and diverse roles, and the fact that certain de nite limitations had been imposed upon our freedom did not lessen our sense of obligation. Not only were we to prepare but we were to perform—not with mere competence but with an almost reckless verve, with, may we say (without evoking the quaint and questionable notion of *négritude)*, Negro American style? Behind each artist there stands a traditional sense of style, a sense of the felt tension indicative of expressive completeness, a mode of humanizing reality and of evoking a feeling of being at home in the world. It is something which the artist shares with the group, and part of our boyish activity expressed a yearning to make any-and everything of quality *Negro American*—to appropriate it, possess it, recreate it in our own group and individual images.

And we recognized and were proud of our group's own style wherever we discerned it—in jazzmen and prize ghters, ballplayers and tap dancers; in gesture, in ection, intonation, timbre and phrasing. Indeed, in all those nuances of expression and attitude which reveal a culture. We did not fully understand the cost of that style but we recognized within it an a rmation of life beyond all question of our di culties as Negroes.

Contrary to the notion currently projected by certain specialists in the "Negro problem" which characterizes the Negro American as self-hating and defensive, we did not so regard ourselves. We felt, among ourselves at least, that we were supposed to be whoever we would and could be, and do anything and everything which other boys did, and do it better. Not defensively, because we were ordered to do so, nor because it was held in the society at large that we were naturally, as Negroes, limited—but because we demanded it of ourselves. Because to measure up to our own standards was the only way of a rming our notion of manhood.

Hence it was no more incongruous, as seen from our own particular perspective in this land of incongruities, for young Negro Oklahomans to project themselves as Renaissance men than for white Mississippians to see themselves as ancient Greeks or noblemen out of Sir Walter Scott. Surely our fantasies have caused

far less damage to the nation's sense of reality, if for no other reason than that ours were expressive of a more democratic ideal.

Remember, too, as William Faulkner made us so vividly aware, that the slaves often took the essence of the aristocratic ideal (as they took Christianity) with far more seriousness than their masters, and that we, thanks to the tight telescoping of American history, were but two generations from that previous condition. Renaissance men, indeed!

I managed, by keeping quiet about it, to cling to our boyish ideal during three years in Alabama, and I brought it with me to New York, where it not only gave silent support to my explorations of what was then an unknown territory, but served to mock and caution me when I became interested in the Communist ideal. And when it was suggested that I try my hand at writing, it was still with me; thus I went about writing rashly unaware that my ambitions as a composer had been fatally diverted.

Once involved, however, I soon became consciously concerned with craft, with technique. And through my discipline of consciousness acquired from the study of music theory I was gradually led, often reluctantly, to become consciously concerned with the nature of the culture and the society out of which American ction is fabricated. The pieces collected here are one of the

results, and their basic signi cance, whatever their value as information or speculation, is autobiographical.

They are concerned with three general themes: with literature and folklore, with Negro musical expression—especially jazz and the blues—and with the complex relationship between the Negro American subculture and North American culture as a whole. Most are occasional pieces, written for magazines whose editors provided opportunities for me to reduce my thinking—indeed, often to discover what I *did* think—to publishable form. Nevertheless, they are a byproduct of that e ort, basic to the ction-writer's confrontation of the world, of converting experience into symbolic action. Good ction is made of that which is real, and reality is di cult to come by. So much of it depends upon the individual's

willingness to discover his true self, upon his de ning himself—for the time being at least—against his background.

Thus these essays represent, in all their modesty, some of the necessary e ort which a writer of my background must make in order to possess the meaning of his experience. They are an attempt to transform some of the themes, the problems, the enigmas, the contradictions of character and culture native to my predicament, into what André Malraux has described as "conscious thought." For me some such e ort was necessary before I could discover the true subject matter of my ction, before I could identify the areas of life and personality which claimed my mind beyond any limitations *apparently* imposed by my racial identity.

The act of writing requires a constant plunging back into the shadow of the past where time hovers ghostlike. When I began writing in earnest I was forced to relate myself consciously and imaginatively to my mixed background as American, as Negro American, and as a Negro from what in its own belated way was a pioneer background. More important, and inseparable from this particular e ort, was the necessity of determining my true relationship to that body of American literature to which I was most attracted and through which, aided by what I could learn from the literatures of Europe, I would nd my own voice, and to which I was challenged, by way of achieving myself, to make some small contribution, and to whose

composite picture of reality I was obligated to o er some necessary modi cations.

This was no matter of sudden insight, but of slow and blundering discovery, of a struggle to stare down the deadly and hypnotic temptation to interpret the world and all its devices in terms of race.

To avoid this was very important to me, and in light of my background far from simple. Indeed, it was quite complex, involving as it does a ceaseless questioning of those formulas through which historians, politicians, sociologists, and an older generation of Negro leaders and writers—those of the so-called “Negro Renaissance”—

had evolved to describe my group’s identity, its predicament, its fate and its relation to the larger society and the culture which we share.

Here the questions of reality and personal identity merge. Yes, and the question of the nature of the reality which underlies American ction and thus the human truth which gives ction viability. In this quest, for such it soon became, I learned that nothing could go unchallenged, especially that feverish industry dedicated to telling Negroes who and what they are, and which can usually be counted upon to deprive both humanity and culture of their complexity. I had undergone, not too many months before taking the path which led to writing, the humiliation of being taught in a class in sociology at a Negro college (from Park and Burgess, the leading textbook in the eld) that Negroes represented the “lady of the races.” This contention the Negro instructor passed blandly along to us without even bothering to wash his hands, much less his teeth. Well, I had no intention of being bound by any such humiliating de nition of my relationship to American literature. Not even to those works which depicted Negroes negatively. Negro Americans have a highly developed ability to abstract desirable qualities from those around them, even from their enemies, and my sense of reality could reject bias while appreciating the truth revealed by achieved art. The pleasure which I derived from reading had long been a necessity, and in the *act* of reading, that marvelous collaboration between the writer’s artful vision and the reader’s sense of life, I had become acquainted with other possible selves—

freer, more courageous and ingenuous and, during the course of the narrative, at least, even wise.

At the time I was under the in uence of Ernest Hemingway, and his description, in *Death in the Afternoon*, of his thinking when he rst went to Spain became very important as translated in my own naïve fashion. He was trying to write, he tells us…

and found the greatest di culty aside from knowing truly what you really felt, rather than what you were supposed to feel, and had been taught to feel, was to put down what really happened in action; what the actual things were which produced the emotion that you experienced…

His statement of moral and aesthetic purpose which followed focused my own search to relate myself to American life through literature. For I found the greatest di culty for a Negro writer was the problem of revealing what he truly felt, rather than serving up what Negroes were supposed to feel, and were encouraged to feel.

And linked to this was the di culty, based upon our long habit of deception and evasion, of depicting what really happened within our areas of American life, and putting down with honesty and without bowing to ideological expediencies the attitudes and values which give Negro American life its sense of wholeness, and which render it bearable and human and, when measured by our own terms, desirable.

I was forced to this awareness through my struggles with the craft of ction; yes, and by my attraction (soon rejected) to Marxist political theory, which was my response to the inferior status which society sought to impose upon me (I did not then, now, or ever *consider* myself inferior). I did not know my true relationship to America—what citizen of the United States really does?—but I did know and accept how I felt inside. And I also knew, thanks to the old Renaissance man, what I expected of myself in the matter of personal discipline and creative quality. Since, by the grace of the past and the examples of manhood picked willy-nilly from the continuing-present of my background, I rejected all negative de nitions imposed upon me by others, there was nothing to do but search for those relationships which were fundamental.

In this sense ction became the agency of my e orts to answer the questions: Who am I, what am I, how did I come to be? What shall I make of the life around me, what celebrate, what reject, how confront the snarl of good and evil which is inevitable? What does American society *mean* when regarded out of my *own* eyes, when informed by my *own* sense of the past and viewed by my *own* complex sense of the present? How, in other words, should I think of myself and my pluralistic sense of the world, how express my vision of the human predicament, without reducing it to a point which would render it sterile before that necessary and tragic—

though enhancing—reduction which must occur before the ctive

vision can come alive? It is quite possible that much potential ction by Negro Americans fails precisely at this point: through the writers' refusal (often through provincialism or lack of courage or opportunism) to achieve a vision of life and a resourcefulness of craft commensurate with the complexity of their actual situation.

Too often they fear to leave the uneasy sanctuary of race to take their chances in the world of art.

Be that as it may, these essays are a witness of that which I have known and that which I have tried and am still trying to confront.

They mark a change of role, a course, and a slow precarious growth of consciousness. They were written in New York and in Rome, and the last were composed during my time as Writer-in-Residence at Rutgers University. The very least I can say about their value is that they performed the grateful function of making it unnecessary to clutter up my ction with half-formed or outrageously wrongheaded ideas. At best they are an embodiment of a conscious attempt to confront, to peer into, the shadow of my past and to remind myself of the complex resources for imaginative creation which are my heritage. Consciousness and conscience are burdens imposed upon us by the American experiment. They are the American's agony, but when he tries to live up to their stern demands they become his justi cation. What more is there to say? What more need be said?

Beyond expressing my thanks to those publishers, editors and magazines which granted me an audience.

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Over the years many people have encouraged me in my writing, by example, by con dence in my talent, and by helpful criticism.

Indeed, there are far too many, considering that the essays collected here go back almost to the beginning of my writing, to be mentioned. Nevertheless, I wish to acknowledge my special indebtedness to Stanley Edgar Hyman, with whom I've shared a community of ideas and critical standards for two decades, and to Kenneth Burke, the stimulating source of many of these; to Albert L.

Murray, who has insisted upon the importance of the overall point

of view developed here since we were students at Tuskegee Institute, and whose memory, les and criticism have been invaluable; to Jimmy Rushing, who through his friendship and through our many hour-long telephone conversations has helped to keep my sense of my Oklahoma background—especially the jazz—

so vividly alive; to Irving Kolodin, at whose requests most of the essays on music came to be written; and to Albert R. Erskine and James H. Silberman of Random House, without whom this book would be most formless indeed. Finally, there has been the help of my beloved wife, Fanny McConnell, who has shown, again and again, through her sacri ces, encouragement and love, more faith in the writer and his talent than the writer has shown in himself.

May, 1964

I

THE SEER AND THE SEEN

That Same Pain,

That Same Pleasure:

An Interview

RICHARD G. STERN: Last night we were talking about the way in which your literary situation has been special, the way in which you as a Negro writer have vaulted the parochial limitations of most Negro ction. Accepting this, not debating it, would you want to talk a bit about the sources of the strength by which you escaped them?

RALPH ELLISON: Well, to the extent that one cannot ever escape what is given, I suppose it had less to do with writing per se than with my desire, beginning at a very early age, to be more fully a part of that larger world which surrounded the Negro world into which I was born. It was a matter of attitude. Then there were the accidents through which so much of that world beyond the Negro community became available to me. Ironically, I would have to start with some of the features of American life which it has become quite fashionable to criticize in a most unthinking way: the mass media.

Like so many kids of the twenties, I played around with radio—

building crystal sets and circuits consisting of a few tubes, which I found published in the radio magazines. At the time we were living in a white middle-class neighborhood, where my mother was custodian for some apartments, and it was while searching the trash for cylindrical ice-cream cartons which were used by amateurs for winding tuning coils that I met a white boy who was looking for the same thing. I gave him some of those I'd found and we became friends. Oddly enough, I don't remember his family name even though his father was pastor of the leading Episcopal church in Oklahoma City at that time, but his nickname was Hoolie, and for kids of eight or nine that was enough. * Due to a rheumatic heart

Hoolie was tutored at home and spent a great deal of time playing by himself and in taking his parents' elaborate radio apart and putting it back together again, and in building circuits of his own.

For all of his delicate health, he was a very intelligent and very alive boy. It didn't take much encouragement from his mother, who was glad to have someone around to keep him company, for me to spend much of my free

time helping with his experiments. By the time I left the community, he had become interested in short-wave communication and was applying for a ham license. I moved back into the Negro community and began to concentrate on music, and was never to see him again, but knowing this white boy was a very meaningful experience. It had little to do with the race question as such, but with our mutual loneliness (I had no other playmates in that community) and a great curiosity about the growing science of radio. It was important for me to know a boy who could approach the intricacies of electronics with such daring and whose mind was intellectually aggressive. Knowing him led me to expect much more of myself and of the world.

The other accident from that period lay in my mother's bringing home copies of such magazines as *Vanity Fair* and of opera recordings which had been discarded by a family for whom she worked. You might say that my environment was extended by these slender threads into the worlds of white families whom personally I knew not at all. These magazines and recordings and the discarded books my mother brought home to my brother and me spoke to me of a life which was broader and more interesting, and although it was not really a part of my own life, I never thought they were not for me simply because I happened to be a Negro. They were things which spoke of a world which I could some day make my own.

STERN: Were you conscious at this time of peculiar limitations upon your freedom of action, perhaps even your freedom of feeling?

ELLISON: Well, now, remember that this was in Oklahoma, which is a border state, and as the forty-sixth state was one of the last of our territories to achieve statehood. Although opened to American

settlers in 1889, at the time of my birth it had been a state only seven years. Thus it had no tradition of slavery, and while it was segregated, relationships between the races were more uid and thus more human than in the old slave states. My parents, like most of the other Negroes, had come to the new state looking for a broader freedom and had never stopped pushing against the barriers. Having arrived at the same time that most of the whites had, they felt that the restriction of Negro freedom was imposed unjustly through the force of numbers and that they had the right and

obligation to ght against it. This was all to the good. It made for a tradition of aggressiveness and it gave us a group social goal which was not as limited as that imposed by the old slave states. I recognized limitations, yes, but I thought these limitations were unjust and I felt no innate sense of inferiority which would keep me from getting those things I desired out of life. There were those who stood in the way but you just had to keep moving toward whatever you wanted.

As a kid I remember working it out this way: there was a world in which you wore your everyday clothes on Sunday, and there was a world in which you wore your Sunday clothes every day. I wanted the world in which you wore your Sunday clothes every day. I wanted it because it represented something better, a more exciting and civilized and human way of living, a world which came to me through certain scenes of felicity which I encountered in ction, in the movies, and which I glimpsed sometimes through the windows of great houses on Sunday afternoons when my mother took my brother and me for walks through the wealthy white sections of the city. I know it now for a boy's vague dream of possibility. Hoolie was part of it, and shop-window displays of elegant clothing, furniture, automobiles—those Lincolns and Marmons!—and of course music and books. And for me none of this was hopelessly beyond the reach of my Negro world, really, because if you worked and you fought for your rights, and so on, you could nally achieve it. This involved our American Negro faith in education, of course, and the idea of self-cultivation, although I couldn't have put it that

way back during the days when the idea rst seized me.

Interestingly enough, by early adolescence the idea of Renaissance man had drifted down to about six of us, and we discussed mastering ourselves and everything in sight as though no such thing as racial discrimination existed. As you can see, quite a lot of our living was done in the imagination.

STERN: At one part of your life you became conscious that there was something precious in being a Negro in this country at this time.

Can you remember when you discovered this?

ELLISON: Well, part of it came from the a rmation of those things in the Negro environment which I found warm and meaningful. For instance, I had none of the agricultural experience of my mother, who had grown up on a farm in Georgia, and although in twenty minutes you could move from Oklahoma City into deep farm country, I shared none of the agricultural experience of many of my classmates. I was of the city, you see. But during the fall cotton-picking season certain kids left school and went with their parents to work in the cotton elds. Now, most parents wished their children to have no contact with the cotton patch; it was part of an experience which they wanted to put behind them. It was part of the Old South which they had come west to forget. Just the same, those trips to the cotton patch seemed to me an enviable experience because the kids came back with such wonderful stories. And it wasn't the hard work which they stressed, but the communion, the playing, the eating, the dancing and the singing. And they brought back jokes, *our* Negro jokes—not those told about Negroes by whites

—and they always returned with Negro folk stories which I'd never heard before and which couldn't be found in any books I knew about. This was something to a rm and I felt there was a richness in it. I didn't think too much about it, but what my schoolmates shared in the country and what I felt in their accounts of it, seemed much more real than the Negro middle-class values which were taught in school.

Or again: I grew up in a school in which music was emphasized and where we were taught harmony from the ninth through the twelfth grades, and where much time was given to music appreciation and the study of the shorter classical forms, but where jazz was considered disreputable. Of course, this is part of the story of jazz even today. So much of the modern experimentation in jazz springs—as far as Negro jazz modernists are concerned—from a misplaced shame over the so-called low-class origins of jazz. These are usually men of Negro middle-class background who have some formal training in music and who would like for jazz to be a

"respectable" form of expression tied up with other forms of revolt.

They'd like to dry up the deep, rowdy stream of jazz until it becomes a very thin trickle of respectable sound indeed. Be that as it may, despite my

teachers, the preachers and other leaders of the community, I was with those who found jazz attractive, an important part of life. I hung around the old Blue Devils Orchestra out of which the famous Basie band was formed. I knew these people and admired them. I knew Jimmy Rushing, the blues singer, who then was not quite the hero of the middle-class people whom I knew that he is today after years of popular success. But for us, even when he was a very young man, a singer who came home to the city once in a while, Jimmy represented, gave voice to, something which was very a rming of Negro life, feelings which you couldn't really put into words. Of course, beyond jazz there was all the boasting, the bragging that went on when no one but ourselves was supposed to be listening, when you weren't really being judged by the white world. At least when you *thought* you weren't being judged and didn't care if you were. For instance, there is no place like a Negro barbershop for hearing what Negroes really think. There is more unselfconscious a rmation to be found here on a Saturday than you can nd in a Negro college in a month, or so it seems to me.

Getting back to your question, I suppose my attitude toward these elements of Negro life became a discipline toward a rming that which felt desirable to me over and beyond anything which we were taught in school. It was more a matter of the heart than of the mind.

STERN: You found something precious, special, and associated it with jazz. Now, between nding that jazz was a vehicle for special qualities which you admired in Negroes and nding that literature was a vehicle, you yourself wanted to employ—

ELLISON: I wanted to be a composer but not a jazz composer, interestingly enough. I wanted to be a symphonist.

STERN: HOW about that, then?

ELLISON: Well, I had always listened to music, and as far back as I can remember I had the desire to create. I can't remember when I rst wanted to play jazz or to create classical music. I can't remember a time when I didn't want to make something, whether it was a small one-tube radio or a crystal set, or my own toys. This was a part of the neighborhood where I spent most of my childhood. There were a number of us who were that way.

STERN: Did your desire to be a symphony composer rather than a jazz instrumentalist stand for a sort of denial of your own cultural situation as a Negro?

ELLISON: No, no. You see, what is often misunderstood nowadays is that there wasn't always this division between the ambitions of jazz musicians and the standards of classical music; the idea was to master both traditions. In school the classics were pushed at us on all sides, and if you danced, if you shared any of the social life of the young people, jazz was inescapable; it was all around you. And if you were a *musician* you were challenged by its sounds and by the techniques required to produce them. In fact, we admired such jazzmen as the late bassist Walter Page and the trumpeter Icky Lawrence over all other local musicians because although they usually played in jazz bands, they could go into any theater pit and play the scores placed before them. They played the arrangements for the silent movies at sight, and we found this very impressive.

Such men as Lawrence and Page—and there were several others—

had conservatory training as well as a rich jazz experience and thus felt no need to draw a line between the two traditions. Following

them, our ideal was to master both. It wasn't a matter of wanting to do the classics because they denied or were felt to deny jazz, and I suppose my own desire to write symphonies grew out of an attraction to the bigger forms and my awareness that they moved many people as they did me in a di erent way. The range of mood was much broader.

STERN: Can you describe the di erence in your own feelings about the two forms?

ELLISON: I can try, but since I shall be trying to recall emotions having to do with the nonverbal medium of music, and at a time when I was a very young and inarticulate boy, I can only give you vague impressions. You see, jazz was so much a part of our total way of life that it got not only into our attempts at playing classical music but into forms of activities usually not associated with it: into marching and into football games, where it has since become a familiar xture. A lot has been written about the role of jazz in a

certain type of Negro funeral marching, but in Oklahoma City it got into military drill. There were many Negro veterans from the Spanish-American War who delighted in teaching the younger boys complicated drill patterns, and on hot summer evenings we spent hours on the Bryant School grounds (now covered with oil wells) learning to execute the commands barked at us by our enthusiastic drillmasters. And as we mastered the patterns, the jazz feeling would come into it and no one was satis ed until we were swinging.

These men who taught us had raised a military discipline to the level of a low art form, almost a dance, and its spirit was jazz.

On the other hand, I became a member of the school band while in the eighth grade, and we played military music, the classical marches, arrangements of symphonic music, overtures, snatches of opera, and so on, and we sang classical sacred music and the Negro spirituals. So all this was a part of it, and not only did we have classes in music appreciation right through school, but on May Day we lled the Western League Ball Park, wrapping maypoles and dancing European folk dances. You really should see a eld of little

Negro kids dancing an Irish jig or a Scottish ing. There must have been something incongruous about it for the few whites who came to see us, but there we were, and for us the dance was the thing.

Culturally everything was mixed, you see, and beyond all question of conscious choices there was a level where you were claimed by emotion and movement and moods which you couldn’t put into words. Often we wanted to share both: the classics and jazz, the Charleston and the Irish reel, spirituals and the blues, the sacred and the profane. I remember the breakfast dances, the matinée dances along with the tent meetings, and the more formal Afro-Methodist Episcopal Christmas services which took place in our church; they all had their special quality. During adolescence I remember attending sunrise services, which took place before Christmas morning. It was a very sacred service, but I remember my mother permitting me to leave after the services were over to attend a breakfast dance. She didn’t attend dances herself and was quite pious by that time, but there was no necessary clash between these quite di erent celebrations of Christmas, and for me the two forms added quite a bit to my sense of the

unity of the life I lived. Just the same, there were certain yearnings which I felt, certain emotions, certain needs for other forms of transcendence and identi cation which I could only associate with classical music. I heard it in Beethoven, I heard it in Schumann. I used to hear it in Wagner—he is really a young man's composer; especially a young bandsman with plenty of brass. I was always a trumpeter, so I was always listening for those composers who made the most use, the loudest use, of the brass choir. Seriously, though, you got glimpses, very vague glimpses, of a far di erent world than that assigned by segregation laws, and I was taken very early with a passion to link together all I loved within the Negro community and all those things I felt in the world which lay beyond.

STERN: So pretty early you had a sense of being part of a larger social or cultural complex?

ELLISON: Put it this way: I learned very early that in the realm of the imagination all people and their ambitions and interests could meet.

This was inescapable, given my reading and my daydreaming. But this notion, this vague awareness, was helped along by the people I came to know. On the level of race relations, my father had many white friends who came to the house when I was quite small, so that any feelings of distrust I was to develop toward whites later on were modi ed by those with whom I had warm relations. Oklahoma o ered many opportunities for such friendships. I remember also an English actress named Emma Bunting—I wonder what happened to her? Anyway, when I was a child, Emma Bunting used to bring over a repertory company each summer, and when she performed in Oklahoma City, her maid, a very handsome Negro woman named Miss Clark, used to stay with us. There was no segregation in the downtown theatres during that period—although it came later—and my mother went frequently to plays and was very proud of a lace bag which Emma Bunting had given her. You see, there is always some connection. Miss Clark brought not only the theater into our house but England as well. I guess it's the breaks in the pattern of segregation which count, the accidents. When I reached high school I knew Dr. Ludwig Hebestreit, a conductor who formed the nucleus of what became the Oklahoma Symphony—a German for whom I used to cut the grass in exchange for

trumpet lessons. But these lessons were about everything else. He'd talk to me about all that lay behind music, and after I'd performed my trumpet lesson and been corrected he'd say, "You like such and such a composition, don't you?" And I'd say, "Yes," and he'd sit down at the piano with a piece of scoring paper and in a few minutes he would have written out passages of the orchestration and show me, bar by bar, how the sounds were blended.

"The strings are doing this," he'd say, "and the trumpets are playing this gure against the woodwinds," and so on.

Most of it was over my head, but he made it all so logical and, better still, he taught me how to attack those things I desired so that I could pierce the mystery and possess them. I came to feel, yes, that

if you want these things and master the technique, you could get with it. You could make it yours. I came to understand, in other words, that all that stood between me and writing symphonies was not simply a matter of civil rights, even though the civil rights struggle was all too real. At that time my mother was being thrown into jail every other day for violating a zoning ordinance by moving into a building in a section where Governor Alfalfa Bill Murray had decided Negroes shouldn't live.

STERN: You went on then to Tuskegee, and you studied music seriously, and came up to New York more or less intending to—

ELLISON: To go back to Tuskegee. I came up during my junior year hoping to work and learn a little about sculpture. And although I did study a bit, I didn't get the job through which I hoped to earn enough money for my school expenses, so I remained in New York, where I soon realized that although I had a certain facility with three-dimensional form I wasn't really interested in sculpture. So after a while I blundered into writing.

STERN: The music you had given up by this time?

ELLISON: No, no, I was still trying to be a musician. I was doing some exercises in composition under Wallingford Riegger, and although I was much behind his advanced students I stayed there and studied with him until I had to have a tonsillectomy. It turned out to be a pretty chronic case

and caused a lot of trouble, and by the time I tried to go back to my classes my mother died out in Ohio and I left New York for a good while. It was during the period in Dayton I started trying seriously to write and that was the breaking point.

STERN: Can you remember why you started to write or how?

ELLISON: I can remember very vividly. Richard Wright had just come to New York and was editing a little magazine. I had read a poem of his which I liked, and when we were introduced by a mutual friend he suggested that I try to review a novel for his magazine. My review was accepted and published and so I was hooked.

STERN: You were launched…

ELLISON: Oh, no, not really launched.

STERN: You were conscious that such a thing was possible. Was Wright famous at that time?

ELLISON: No, Wright hadn't written *Native Son*. He had published *Uncle Tom's Children*, which was the real beginning of his fame, and he was already working on *Native Son*. I remember the rst scene that he showed me was the poolroom scene; it isn't the rst scene but it was one of the rst written and I was to read the rest of the book as it came out of the typewriter.

STERN: At that time were you dissatis ed with the sort of work Wright was doing?

ELLISON: Dissatis ed? I was too amazed with watching the process of creation. I didn't understand quite what was going on, but by this time I had talked with Wright a lot and he was very conscious of technique. He talked about it not in terms of mysti cation but as writing know-how. "You must read so-and-so," he'd say. "You have to go about learning to write *consciously*. People have talked about such and such a problem and have written about it. You must learn how Conrad, Joyce, Dostoevsky get their e ects …" He guided me to Henry James and to Conrad's prefaces, that type

of thing. Of course, I knew that my own feelings about the world, about life, were di erent, but this was not even a matter to question. Wright knew what he was about, what he wanted to do, while I hadn't even discovered myself. I knew only that what I would want to express would not be an imitation of his kind of thing.

STERN: So what sort of thing did you feel Wright was not doing that you wanted to do?

ELLISON: Well, I don't suppose I judged. I am certain I did not judge in quite so conscious a way, but I think I felt more complexity in life, and my background made me aware of a larger area of

possibility. Knowing Wright himself and something of what he was doing increased that sense of the possible. Also, I think I was less interested in an ideological interpretation of Negro experience. For all my interest in music, I had been in love with literature for years and years—if a writer may make such a confession. I read everything. I must have read fairy tales until I was thirteen, and I was always taken with the magical quality of writing, with the poetry of it. When I came to discover a little more about what I wanted to express I felt that Wright was overcommitted to ideology

—even though I, too, wanted many of the same things for our people. You might say that I was much less a social determinist. But I suppose that basically it comes down to a di erence in our concepts of the individual. I, for instance, found it disturbing that Bigger Thomas had none of the ner qualities of Richard Wright, none of the imagination, none of the sense of poetry, none of the gaiety. And I preferred Richard Wright to Bigger Thomas. Do you see? Which gets you in on the … directs you back to the di erence between what Wright was himself and how he conceived of the individual—back to his conception of the quality of Negro humanity.

STERN: Did you think you might write stories in which Negroes did not appear?

ELLISON: No, there was never a time when I thought of writing ction in which only Negroes appeared, or in which only whites appeared.

And yet, from the very beginning I wanted to write about American Negro experience, and I suspected that what was important, what made the di erence, lay in the perspective from which it was viewed. When I learned more and started thinking about this consciously, I realized that it was a source of creative strength as well as a source of wonder. It's also a relatively unexplored area of American experience simply because our knowledge of it has been distorted through the overemphasis of the sociological approach.

Unfortunately many Negroes have been trying to de ne their own predicament in exclusively sociological terms, a situation I consider

quite shortsighted. Too many of us have accepted a statistical interpretation of our lives, and thus much of that which makes us a source of moral strength to America goes unappreciated and unde ned. Now, when you try to trace American values as they nd expression in the Negro community, where do you begin? To what books do you go? How do you account for Little Rock and the sitins? How do you account for the strength of those kids? You can nd sociological descriptions of the conditions under which they live but few indications of their morale.

STERN: You felt as you were starting to get serious about writing that you had a special subject to write about?

ELLISON: Yes, I think so. Well, let's put it this way: Sometimes you get a sense of mission even before you are aware of it. An act is demanded of you but you're like a sleepwalker searching for some important object, and when you nd it you wake up to discover that it is the agency through which that mission, assigned you long ago, at a time you barely understood the command, could be accomplished. Thus while there appeared to be no connection between my wanting to write ction and my mother's insistence, from the time I was a small boy, that the hope of our group depended not upon the older Negroes but upon the young—upon me, as it were—this sense of obligation got into my work immediately. Of course these are very complicated matters, because I have no desire to write propaganda. Instead I felt it important to explore the full range of American Negro humanity and to a rm those qualities which are of value beyond any question of segregation, economics or previous condition of servitude. The obligation

was always there and there is much to a rm. In fact, all Negroes a rm certain feelings of identity—certain foods, certain types of dancing, music, religious experiences, certain tragic attitudes toward experience and toward our situation as Americans.

You see, we do this all within the community, but when it is questioned from without—that's when things start going apart. Like most Americans, we are not yet fully conscious of our identity either

as Negroes or Americans. This a rmation of which I speak, this insistence upon achieving our social goal, has been our great strength and also our great weakness because the terms with which we have tried to de ne ourselves have been inadequate. We know we're not the creatures which our enemies in the white South would have us be, and we know too that neither color nor our civil predicament explain us adequately. Our strength is that with the total society saying to us, "*No, No, No, No,"* we continue to move toward our goal. So when I came to write I felt moved to a rm and to explore all this—not as a social mission but as the stu of literature and as an expression of the better part of my own sense of life.

STERN: Somebody has described a literary situation as one which commemorates what a man feels is passing or threatened. Did you feel that your work might be a commemoration of values which were disappearing as you wrote about them?

ELLISON: How shall I say? Yes, I do feel this. Now, just how consciously I was concerned with it at the time I wrote I don't know.

When I started writing *Invisible Man* I was reading Lord Raglan's *The Hero,* in which he goes into gures of history and myth to account for the features which make for the mythic hero, and at the same time I got to thinking about the ambiguity of Negro leadership during that period. This was the late forties, and I kept trying to account for the fact that when the chips were down, Negro leaders did not represent the Negro community.

Beyond their own special interests they represented white philanthropy, white politicians, business interests, and so on. This was an unfair way of looking at it, perhaps, but there was something missing, something which is

only now being corrected. It seemed to me that they acknowledged no nal responsibility to the Negro community for their acts, and implicit in their roles were constant acts of betrayal. This made for a sad, chronic division between their values and the values of those they were supposed to represent. And the fairest thing to say about it is that the predicament of Negroes in

the United States rendered these leaders automatically impotent until they recognized their true source of power—which lies, as Martin Luther King perceived, in the Negro's ability to su er even death for the attainment of our beliefs. Back in the forties only preachers had real power through which to e ect their wills, but most of these operated strictly within the Negro community. Only Adam Powell was using the power of the Negro church to assert the Negro's political will. So at that time a thick fog of unreality separated the Negro group from its leaders.

But let me tell you a story: At Tuskegee during graduation week countless high-powered word artists, black and white, descended upon us and gathered in the gym and the chapel to tell us in high-own words what the Negro thought, what our lives were and what our goals should be. The buildings would be packed with visitors and relatives and many guardians of race relations—Northern and Southern. Well, the Negro farm people from the surrounding countryside would also come to the campus at the same time.

Graduation week was a festival time for the surrounding Negro community, and very often these people would have children and relatives taking part in the ceremonies in progress in the chapel and the gym. But do you know that while the big-shot word artists were making their most impressive speeches, the farm people would be out on the old athletic eld dancing square dances, having picnics, playing baseball and visiting among themselves as though the ceremonies across the wide lawns did not exist—or at best had no connection with the lives they led. Well, I found their celebrations much more attractive than the o cial ceremonies, and I would leave my seat in the orchestra and sneak out to watch them, and while my city background had cut me o from the lives they led and I had no desire to live the life of a

sharecropper, I found their unrhetorical activities on the old football eld the more meaningful.

STERN: The familiar liberal hope is that any specialized form of social life which makes for invidious distinctions should disappear. Your view seems to be that anything that counts is the result of such specialization.

ELLISON: Yes.

STERN: Now, a good many people, millions, are damaged permanently, viciously, unfairly by such distinctions. At the same time, they contribute, as you more than perhaps any writer in the world have seen, to something marvelous. Some sort of decision probably has to be made by an individual who is sensitive to this paradox. I wonder what yours is. Do you want the preservation of that which results in both the marvelous and the terrible, or do you feel that the marvelous should not endure while the terrible endures along with it?

ELLISON: I am going to say something very odd. In the rst place, I think that the mixture of the marvelous and the terrible is a basic condition of human life, and that the persistence of human ideals represents the marvelous pulling itself up out of the chaos of the universe. In the fairy tale, beauty must be awakened by the beast; the beastly man can only regain his humanity through love. There are other terms for this but they come to much the same thing. Here the terrible represents all that hinders, all that opposes human aspiration, and the marvelous represents the triumph of the human spirit over chaos. While the terms and the conditions are di erent and often change, our triumphs are few and thus must be recognized for what they are and preserved. Besides, I would be hard put to say where the terrible could be localized in our national experience, for I see in so much of American life which lies beyond the Negro community the very essence of the terrible.

STERN: Yes, but in the last few days we have been talking about some of the particular meannesses which are characteristic of the Negro situation … Just the fact that there are four Negro congressmen, when adequate representation would mean that there’d be twenty…

ELLISON: Yes.

STERN: And hundreds of things of this sort, many of which result in crippling injustices and meannesses. Now, can this go on? And if it

doesn’t go on, will this mean the elimination of that which you have commemorated in ction?

ELLISON: Well, what I have tried to commemorate in ction is that which I believe to be enduring and abiding in our situation, especially those human qualities which the American Negro has developed despite, and in rejection of, the obstacles and meannesses imposed upon us. If the writer exists for any social good, his role is that of preserving in art those human values which can endure by confronting change. Our Negro situation is changing rapidly, but so much which we’ve gleaned through the harsh discipline of Negro American life is simply too precious to be lost. I speak of the faith, the patience, the humor, the sense of timing, the rugged sense of life and the manner of expressing it which all go to de ne the American Negro. These are some of the things through which we’ve confronted the obstacles and meannesses of which you speak, and which we dare not fail to adapt to changed conditions lest we destroy ourselves. Times change, but these possessions must endure forever—not simply because they de ne us as a group, but because they represent a further instance of man’s triumph over chaos. You know, the skins of those thin-legged little girls who faced the mob in Little Rock marked them as Negro, but the spirit which directed their feet is the old universal urge toward freedom. For better or worse, whatever there is of value in Negro life is an American heritage, and as such it must be preserved. Besides, I am unwilling to see those values which I would celebrate in ction as existing sheerly through terror; they are a result of a tragicomic confrontation with life.

I think that art is a celebration of life even when life extends into death, and that the sociological conditions which have made for so much misery in Negro life are not necessarily the only factors which make for the values which I feel should endure and shall endure. I see a period when Negroes are going to be wandering around because, you see, we have had this thing thrown at us for so long that we haven’t had a chance to discover what in our own background is really worth preserving. For the rst time we are

given a choice, we are making a choice. And this is where the real trouble is going to start. The South could help. If it had a sense of humor, you know, the South could say, “All right, we will set aside six months and there will be complete integration—all right, you don’t have to integrate the women—but there will be complete integration as far as anything else is concerned. Negroes may go anywhere, they may see how we entertain, how we spend our leisure, how we worship, and so on,” and that would be the end of the whole problem. Because most Negroes could not be nourished by the life white Southerners live. It is too hag-ridden, it is too obsessed, it is too concerned with attitudes which could change everything that Negroes have been conditioned to expect of life. No, I believe in diversity, and I think that the real death of the United States will come when everyone is just alike.

As for my writer’s necessity of cashing in on the pain undergone by my people (and remember I write of the humor as well), writing is my way of confronting, often for the hundredth time, that same pain and that same pleasure. It is my way of seeing that it be not in vain.

From *December*, Winter 1961.

*Thanks to the Reverend Kenneth R. Coleman, Chaplain of the Episcopal Church at Yale

University, to whom (in 1963) I related the circumstances of this old friendship, I was put in touch with the Reverend R. A. Laud Humphreys, Historiographer of the Episcopal Diocese of Oklahoma, who in turn kindly interested himself in the mystery of my childhood friend. Thus I now know not only that “Hoolie” is the son of the Reverend Franklin Davis and Mrs. Davis, but that his real name is Henry Bowman Otto Davis. He is now an electronics expert connected with the Air Force.

Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity

When this essay was published in 1953, it was prefaced with the following note:

When I started rewriting this essay it occurred to me that its value might be somewhat increased if it remained very much as I wrote it during 1946. For

in that form it is what a young member of a minority felt about much of our writing. Thus I've left in much of the bias and shortsightedness, for it says perhaps as much about me as a member of a minority as it does about literature. I hope you still nd the essay useful, and I'd like to see an editorial note stating that this is an unpublished piece written not long after the Second World War.

PERHAPS the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word. And by this I mean the word in all its complex formulations, from the proverb to the novel and stage play, the word with all its subtle power to suggest and foreshadow overt action while magically disguising the moral consequences of that action and providing it with symbolic and psychological justi cation. For if the word has the potency to revive and make us free, it has also the power to blind, imprison and destroy.

The essence of the word is its ambivalence, and in ction it is never so e ective and revealing as when both potentials are operating simultaneously, as when it mirrors both good and bad, as when it blows both hot and cold in the same breath. Thus it is unfortunate for the Negro that the most powerful formulations of modern American ctional words have been so slanted against him

that when he approaches for a glimpse of himself he discovers an image drained of humanity.

Obviously the experiences of Negroes—slavery, the grueling and continuing ght for full citizenship since Emancipation, the stigma of color, the enforced alienation which constantly knifes into our natural identi cation with our country—have not been those of white Americans. And though as passionate believers in democracy Negroes identify themselves with the broader American ideals, their sense of reality springs, in part, from an American experience which most white men not only have not had, but one with which they are reluctant to identify themselves even when presented in forms of the imagination. Thus, when the white American, holding up most twentieth-century ction, says, "This is American reality," the Negro tends to answer (not at all concerned that Americans tend

generally to ght against any but the most attering imaginative depictions of their lives), “Perhaps, but you’ve left out this, and this, and this.

And most of all, what you’d have the world accept as *me* isn’t even human.”

Nor does he refer only to second-rate works but to those of our most representative authors. Either like Hemingway and Steinbeck (in whose joint works I recall not more than ve American Negroes), they tend to ignore them, or like the early Faulkner, who distorted Negro humanity to t his personal versions of Southern myth, they seldom conceive Negro characters possessing the full, complex ambiguity of the human. Too often what is presented as the American Negro (a most complex example of Western man) emerges an oversimpli ed clown, a beast or an angel. Seldom is he drawn as that sensitively focused process of opposites, of good and evil, of instinct and intellect, of passion and spirituality, which great literary art has projected as the image of man. Naturally the attitude of Negroes toward this writing is one of great reservation. Which, indeed, bears out Richard Wright’s remark that there is in progress between black and white Americans a struggle over the nature of reality.

Historically this is but a part of that larger con ict between older, dominant groups of white Americans, especially the Anglo-Saxons,

on the one hand, and the newer white and nonwhite groups on the other, over the major group’s attempt to impose its ideals upon the rest, insisting that its exclusive image be accepted as *the* image of the American. This con ict should not, however, be misunderstood.

For despite the impact of the American idea upon the world, the

“American” himself has not (fortunately for the United States, its minorities, and perhaps for the world) been nally de ned. So that far from being socially undesirable this struggle between Americans as to what the American is to be is part of that democratic process through which the nation works to achieve itself. Out of this con ict the ideal American character—a type truly great enough to possess the greatness of the land, a delicately poised unity of divergencies—

is slowly being born.

But we are concerned here with ction, not history. How is it then that our naturalistic prose—one of the most vital bodies of twentieth-century ction, perhaps the brightest instrument for recording sociological fact, physical action, the nuance of speech, yet achieved—becomes suddenly dull when confronting the Negro?

Obviously there is more in this than the mere verbal counterpart of lynching or segregation. Indeed, it represents a projection of processes lying at the very root of American culture, and certainly at the central core of its twentieth-century literary forms, a matter having less to do with the mere "re ection" of white racial theories than with processes molding the attitudes, the habits of mind, the cultural atmosphere and the artistic and intellectual traditions that condition men dedicated to democracy to practice, accept and, most crucial of all, often blind themselves to the essentially undemocratic treatment of their fellow citizens.

It should be noted here that the moment criticism approaches Negro-white relationships it is plunged into problems of psychology and symbolic ritual. Psychology, because the distance between Americans, Negroes and whites, is not so much spatial as psychological; while they might dress and often look alike, seldom on deeper levels do they think alike. Ritual, because the Negroes of ction are so consistently false to human life that we must question

just what they truly represent, both in the literary work and in the inner world of the white American. *

Despite their billings as images of reality, these Negroes of ction are counterfeits. They are projected aspects of an internal symbolic process through which, like a primitive tribesman dancing himself into the group frenzy necessary for battle, the white American prepares himself emotionally to perform a social role. These ctive Negroes are not, as sometimes interpreted, simple racial clichés introduced into society by a ruling class to control political and economic realities. For although they are manipulated to that end, such an externally onesided interpretation relieves the individual of personal responsibility for the health of

democracy. Not only does it forget that a democracy is a collectivity of *individuals,* but it never suspects that the tenacity of the stereotype springs exactly from the fact that its function is no less personal than political. Color prejudice springs not from the stereotype alone, but from an internal psychological state; not from misinformation alone, but from an inner need to believe. It thrives not only on the obscene witch-doctoring of men like Jimmy Byrnes and Malan, but upon an inner craving for symbolic magic. The prejudiced individual creates his own stereotypes, very often unconsciously, by reading into situations involving Negroes those stock meanings which justify his emotional and economic needs.

Hence whatever else the Negro stereotype might be as a social instrumentality, it is also a key gure in a magic rite by which the white American seeks to resolve the dilemma arising between his democratic beliefs and certain antidemocratic practices, between his acceptance of the sacred democratic belief that all men are created equal and his treatment of every tenth man as though he were not.

Thus on the moral level I propose that we view the whole of American life as a drama acted out upon the body of a Negro giant, who, lying trussed up like Gulliver, forms the stage and the scene upon which and within which the action unfolds. If we examine the beginning of the Colonies, the application of this view is not, in its economic connotations at least, too far-fetched or too di cult to see. For then the Negro's body was exploited as amorally as the soil

and climate. It was later, when white men drew up a plan for a democratic way of life, that the Negro began slowly to exert an in uence upon America's moral consciousness. Gradually he was recognized as the human factor placed outside the democratic master plan, a human "natural" resource who, so that white men could become more human, was elected to undergo a process of institutionalized dehumanization.

Until the Korean War this moral role had become obscured within the staggering growth of contemporary science and industry, but during the nineteenth century it ared nakedly in the American consciousness, only to be repressed after the Reconstruction. During periods of national crises, when the United States rounds a sudden curve on the pitch-black road of

history, this moral awareness surges in the white American's conscience like a raging river revealed at his feet by a lightning ash. Only then is the veil of anti-Negro myths, symbols, stereotypes and taboos drawn somewhat aside. And when we look closely at our literature it is to be seen operating even when the Negro seems most patently the little man who isn't there.

• • •

I see no value either in presenting a catalogue of Negro characters appearing in twentieth-century ction or in charting the racial attitudes of white writers. We are interested not in quantities but in qualities. And since it is impossible here to discuss the entire body of this writing, the next best thing is to select a framework in which the relationships with which we are concerned may be clearly seen.

For brevity let us take three representative writers: Mark Twain, Hemingway and Faulkner. Twain for historical perspective and as an example of how a great nineteenth-century writer handled the Negro; Hemingway as the prime example of the artist who ignored the dramatic and symbolic possibilities presented by this theme; and Faulkner as an example of a writer who has confronted Negroes with such mixed motives that he has presented them in terms of both the "good nigger" and the "bad nigger" stereotypes, and who

yet has explored perhaps more successfully than anyone else, either white or black, certain forms of Negro humanity.

For perspective let us begin with Mark Twain's great classic, *Huckleberry Finn*. Recall that Huckleberry has run away from his father, Miss Watson and the Widow Douglas (indeed the whole community, in relation to which he is a young outcast), and has with him as companion on the raft upon which they are sailing down the Mississippi Miss Watson's runaway Negro slave, Jim.

Recall, too, that Jim, during the critical moment of the novel, is stolen by two scoundrels and sold to another master, presenting Huck with the problem of freeing Jim once more. Two ways are open: he can rely upon his own ingenuity and "steal" Jim into freedom, or he might write Miss Watson

and request reward money to have Jim returned to her. But there is a danger in this course, remember, since the angry woman might sell the slave down the river into a harsher slavery. It is this course which Huck starts to take, but as he composes the letter he wavers.

It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

"All right, then, I'll *go* to hell"—and tore it up.

It was awful thoughts, and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. I shoved the whole thing out of my head; and said I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it, and the other warn't. And for a starter I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again.…

And a little later, in defending his decision to Tom Sawyer, Huck comments, "I know you'll say it's dirty, low-down business but *I'm* low-down. And I'm going to steal him …"

We have arrived at a key point of the novel and, by an ironic reversal, of American ction, a pivotal moment announcing a change of direction in the plot, a reversal as well as a recognition scene (like that in which Oedipus discovers his true identity), wherein a new de nition of necessity is being formulated. Huck

Finn has struggled with the problem posed by the clash between property rights and human rights, between what the community considered to be the proper attitude toward an escaped slave and his knowledge of Jim's humanity, gained through their adventures as fugitives together. He has made his decision on the side of humanity. In this passage Twain has stated the basic moral issue centering around Negroes and the white American's democratic ethics. It dramatizes as well the highest point of tension generated by the clash between the direct, human relationships of the frontier and the abstract, inhuman, market-dominated relationships fostered by the rising middle class—which in Twain's day was already compromising dangerously with the most inhuman aspects of the defeated

slave system. And just as politically these forces reached their sharpest tension in the outbreak of the Civil War, in *Huckleberry Finn* (both the boy and the novel) their human implications come to sharpest focus around the gure of the Negro.

Huckleberry Finn knew, as did Mark Twain, that Jim was not only a slave but a human being, a man who in some ways was to be envied, and who expressed his essential humanity in his desire for freedom, his will to possess his own labor, in his loyalty and capacity for friendship, and in his love for his wife and child. Yet Twain, though guilty of the sentimentality common to humorists, does not idealize the slave. Jim is drawn in all his ignorance and superstition, with his good traits and his bad. He, like all men, is ambiguous, limited in circumstance but not in possibility. And it will be noted that when Huck makes his decision he identi es himself with Jim and accepts the judgment of his superego—that internalized representative of the community—that his action is evil. Like Prometheus, who for mankind stole re from the gods, he embraces the evil implicit in his act in order to a rm his belief in humanity. Jim, therefore, is not simply a slave, he is a symbol of humanity, and in freeing Jim, Huck makes a bid to free himself of the conventionalized evil taken for civilization by the town.

This conception of the Negro as a symbol of Man—the reversal of what he represents in most contemporary thought—was organic to

nineteenth-century literature. It occurs not only in Twain but in Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman and Melville (whose symbol of evil, incidentally, was white), all of whom were men publicly involved in various forms of deeply personal rebellion. And while the Negro and the color black were associated with the concept of evil and ugliness far back in the Christian era, the Negro’s emergence as a symbol of value came, I believe, with Rationalism and the rise of the romantic individual of the eighteenth century. This, perhaps because the romantic was in revolt against the old moral authority, and if he su ered a sense of guilt, his passion for personal freedom was such that he was willing to accept evil (a tragic attitude), even to identifying himself with the “noble slave”—who symbolized the darker, unknown potential side of his personality, that underground side, turgid

with possibility, which might, if given a chance, toss a stful of mud into the sky and create a “shining star.”

Even that prototype of the bourgeois, Robinson Crusoe, stopped to speculate as to his slave’s humanity. And the rising American industrialists of the late nineteenth century were to rediscover what their European counterparts had learned a century before: that the good man Friday was as sound an investment for Crusoe morally as he was economically, for not only did Friday allow Crusoe to achieve himself by working for him, but by functioning as a living scapegoat to contain Crusoe’s guilt over breaking with the institutions and authority of the past, he made it possible to exploit even his guilt economically. The man was one of the rst missionaries.

Mark Twain was alive to this irony and refused such an easy (and dangerous) way out. Huck Finn’s acceptance of the evil implicit in his “emancipation” of Jim represents Twain’s acceptance of his personal responsibility for the condition of society. This was the tragic face behind his comic mask.

But by the twentieth century this attitude of tragic responsibility had disappeared from our literature along with that broad conception of democracy which vitalized the work of our greatest writers. After Twain’s compelling image of black and white

fraternity the Negro generally disappears from ction as a rounded human being. And if already in Twain’s time a novel which was optimistic concerning a democracy which would include all men could not escape being banned from public libraries, by our day his great drama of interracial fraternity had become, for most Americans at least, an amusing boy’s story and nothing more. But while a boy, Huck Finn has become by the somersault motion of what William Empson terms “pastoral,” an embodiment of the heroic, and an exponent of humanism. Indeed, the historical justi cation for his adolescence lies in the fact that Twain was depicting a transitional period of American life; its artistic justi cation is that adolescence is the time of the “great confusion,”

during which both individuals and nations ounder between accepting and rejecting the responsibilities of adulthood.

Accordingly, Huck's relationship to Jim, the river and all they symbolize, is that of a humanist; in his relation to the community he is an individualist. He embodies the two major con icting drives operating in nineteenth-century America. And if humanism is man's basic attitude toward a social order which he accepts, and individualism his basic attitude toward one he rejects, one might say that Twain, by allowing these two attitudes to argue dialectically in his work of art, was as highly moral an artist as he was a believer in democracy, and vice versa.

History, however, was to bring an ironic reversal to the direction which Huckleberry Finn chose, and by our day the divided ethic of the community had won out. In contrast with Twain's humanism, individualism was thought to be the only tenable attitude for the artist.

Thus we come to Ernest Hemingway, one of the two writers whose art is based most solidly upon Mark Twain's language, and one who perhaps has done most to extend Twain's technical in uence upon our ction. It was Hemingway who pointed out that all modern American writing springs from *Huckleberry Finn*. (One might add here that equally as much of it derives from Hemingway himself.) But by the twenties the element of rejection implicit in

Twain had become so dominant an attitude of the American writer that Hemingway goes on to warn us to "stop where the Nigger Jim is stolen from the boys. That is the real end. The rest is just cheating."

So thoroughly had the Negro, both as man and as a symbol of man, been pushed into the underground of the American conscience that Hemingway missed completely the structural, symbolic and moral necessity for that part of the plot in which the boys rescue Jim. Yet it is precisely this part which gives the novel its signi cance. Without it, except as a boy's tale, the novel is meaningless. Yet Hemingway, a great artist in his own right, speaks as a victim of that culture of which he is himself so critical, for by his time that growing rift in the ethical fabric pointed out by Twain had become completely sundered—snagged upon the irrepressible moral reality of the Negro. Instead of the single democratic ethic for every man, there now existed two: one, the idealized ethic of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, reserved for white men, and the other, the pragmatic ethic

designed for Negroes and other minorities, which took the form of discrimination. Twain had dramatized the con ict leading to this division in its earlier historical form, but what was new here was that such a moral division, always a threat to the sensitive man, was ignored by the artist in the most general terms, as when Hemingway rails against the rhetoric of the First World War.

Hemingway's blindness to the moral values of *Huckleberry Finn* despite his sensitivity to its technical aspects duplicated the onesided vision of the twenties. Where Twain, seeking for what Melville called "the common continent of man," drew upon the rich folklore of the frontier (not omitting the Negro's) in order to

"Americanize" his idiom, thus broadening his stylistic appeal, Hemingway was alert only to Twain's technical discoveries—the exible colloquial language, the sharp naturalism, the thematic potentialities of adolescence. Thus what for Twain was a means to a moral end became for Hemingway an end in itself. And just as the trend toward technique for the sake of technique and production for the sake of the market lead to the neglect of the human need out of

which they spring, so do they lead in literature to a marvelous technical virtuosity won at the expense of a gross insensitivity to fraternal values.

It is not accidental that the disappearance of the human Negro from our ction coincides with the disappearance of deep-probing doubt and a sense of evil. Not that doubt in some form was not always present, as the works of the lost generation, the muckrakers and the proletarian writers make very clear. But it is a shallow doubt, which seldom turns inward upon the writer's own values; almost always it focuses outward, upon some scapegoat with which he is seldom able to identify himself as Huck Finn identi ed himself with the scoundrels who stole Jim, and with Jim himself. This particular naturalism explored everything except the nature of man.

And when the artist would no longer conjure with the major moral problem in American life, he was defeated as a manipulator of profound social passions. In the United States, as in Europe, the triumph of industrialism had repelled the artist with the blatant hypocrisy between its ideals and its

acts. But while in Europe the writer became the most profound critic of these matters, in our country he either turned away or was at best halfhearted in his opposition—perhaps because any profound probing of human values, both within himself and within society, would have brought him face to face with the rigidly tabooed subject of the Negro. And now the tradition of avoiding the moral struggle had led not only to the artistic segregation of the Negro but to the segregation of real fraternal, i.e., democratic, values.

The hard-boiled school represented by Hemingway, for instance, is usually spoken of as a product of World War I disillusionment; yet it was as much the product of a tradition which arose even before the Civil War—that tradition of intellectual evasion for which Thoreau criticized Emerson in regard to the Fugitive Slave Law, and which had been growing swiftly since the failure of the ideals in whose name the Civil War was fought. The failure to resolve the problem symbolized by the Negro has contributed indirectly to the dispossession of the artist in several ways. By excluding our largest minority from the democratic process, the United States weakened

all national symbols and rendered sweeping public rituals which would dramatize the American dream impossible; it robbed the artist of a body of unassailable public beliefs upon which he could base his art; it deprived him of a personal faith in the ideals upon which society supposedly rested; and it provided him with no tragic mood indigenous to his society upon which he could erect a tragic art. The result was that he responded with an attitude of rejection, which he expressed as artistic individualism. But too often both his rejection and individualism were narrow; seldom was he able to transcend the limitations of pragmatic reality, and the quality of moral imagination—the fountainhead of great art—was atrophied within him.

Malraux has observed that contemporary American writing is the only important literature not created by intellectuals, and that the creators possess “neither the relative historical culture, nor the love of ideas (a prerogative of professors in the United States)” of comparable Europeans. And is there not a connection between the nonintellectual aspects of this writing (though many of the writers are far more intellectual than they

admit or than Malraux would suspect) and its creators' rejection of broad social responsibility, between its non-concern with ideas and its failure to project characters who grasp the broad sweep of American life, or who even attempt to state its fundamental problems? And has not this a ected the types of heroes of this ction? Is it not a partial explanation of why it has created no characters possessing broad insight into their situations or the emotional, psychological and intellectual complexity which would allow them to possess and articulate a truly democratic world view?

It is instructive that Hemingway, born into a civilization characterized by violence, should seize upon the ritualized violence of the culturally distant Spanish bull ght as a laboratory for developing his style. For it was, for Americans (though not for the Spaniards), an amoral violence which he was seeking. Otherwise he might have studied that ritual of violence closer to home, that ritual in which the sacri ce is that of a human scapegoat, the lynching

bee. Certainly this rite is not con ned to the rope as agency, nor to the South as scene, nor even to the Negro as victim.

But let us not confuse the conscious goals of twentieth-century ction with those of the nineteenth century; let us take it on its own terms. Artists such as Hemingway were seeking a technical perfection rather than moral insight. (Or should we say that theirs was a morality of technique?) They desired a style stripped of unessentials, one that would appeal without resorting to what was considered worn-out rhetoric, or best of all without any rhetoric whatsoever. It was felt that through the default of the powers that ruled society the artist had as his major task the "pictorial presentation of the evolution of a personal problem." Instead of recreating and extending the national myth as he did this, the writer now restricted himself to elaborating his personal myth. And although naturalist in his general style, he was not interested, like Balzac, in depicting a society, or even, like Mark Twain, in portraying the moral situation of a nation. Rather he was engaged in working out a personal problem through the evocative, emotion-charged images and ritual therapy available through the manipulation of art forms. And while art was still an instrument of freedom, it was now mainly the

instrument of a questionable personal freedom for the artist, which too often served to enforce the “unfreedom” of the reader.

This because it is not within the province of the artist to determine whether his work is social or not. Art by its nature *is* social. And while the artist can determine within a certain narrow scope the type of social e ect he wishes his art to create, here his will is de nitely limited. Once introduced into society, the work of art begins to pulsate with those meanings, emotions, ideas brought to it by its audience, and over which the artist has but limited control. The irony of the “lost generation” writers is that while disavowing a social role it was the fate of their works to perform a social function which re-enforced those very social values which they most violently opposed. How could this be? Because in its genesis the work of art, like the stereotype, is personal;

psychologically it represents the socialization of some profoundly personal problem involving guilt (often symbolic murder—parricide, fratricide, incest, homosexuality—all problems at the base of personality) from which by expressing them along with other elements (images, memories, emotions, ideas) he seeks transcendence. To be e ective as personal ful llment, if it is to be more than dream, the work of art must simultaneously evoke images of reality and give them formal organization. And it must, since the individual’s emotions are formed in society, shape them into socially meaningful patterns (even Surrealism and Dadaism depended upon their initiates). Nor, as we can see by comparing literature with reportage, is this all. The work of literature di ers basically from reportage not merely in its presentation of a pattern of events, nor in its concern with emotion (for a report might well be an account of highly emotional events), but in the deep personal necessity which cries full-throated in the work of art and which seeks transcendence in the form of ritual.

Malcolm Cowley, on the basis of the rites which he believes to be the secret dynamic of Hemingway’s work, has identi ed him with Poe, Hawthorne and Melville, “the haunted and nocturnal writers,”

he calls them, “the men who dealt with images that were symbols of an inner world.” In Hemingway’s work, he writes, “we can recognize rites of animal sacri ce … of sexual union … of conversion … and of symbolic

death and rebirth.” I do not believe, however, that the presence of these rites in writers like Hemingway is as important as the fact that here, beneath the deadpan prose, the cadences of understatement, the anti-intellectualism, the concern with every “fundamental” of man except that which distinguishes him from the animal—that here is the twentieth-century form of that magical rite which during periods of great art has been to a large extent public and explicit. Here is the literary form by which the personal guilt of the pulverized individual of our rugged era is expatiated: not through his identi cation with the guilty acts of an Oedipus, a Macbeth or a Medea, by su ering their agony and loading his sins upon their “strong and passionate shoulders,” but by being gored with a bull, hooked with a sh, impaled with a

grasshopper on a shhook; not by identifying himself with human heroes, but with those who are indeed defeated.

On the social level this writing performs a function similar to that of the stereotype: it conditions the reader to accept the less worthy values of society, and it serves to justify and absolve our sins of social irresponsibility. With unconscious irony it advises stoic acceptance of those conditions of life which it so accurately describes and which it pretends to reject. And when I read the early Hemingway I seem to be in the presence of a Huckleberry Finn who, instead of identifying himself with humanity and attempting to steal Jim free, chose to write the letter which sent him back into slavery.

So that now he is a Huck full of regret and nostalgia, su ering a sense of guilt that lls even his noondays with nightmares, and against which, like a terri ed child avoiding the cracks in the sidewalk, he seeks protection through the compulsive minor rituals of his prose.

The major di erence between nineteenth-and twentieth-century writers is not in the latter’s lack of personal rituals—a property of all ction worthy of being termed literature—but in the social e ect aroused within their respective readers. Melville’s ritual (and his rhetoric) was based upon materials that were more easily available, say, than Hemingway’s. They represented a blending of his personal myth with universal myths as traditional as any used by Shakespeare or the Bible, while until *For Whom*

the Bell Tolls Hemingway's myth was weighted on the personal side. The di erence in perspective is that Melville's belief could still nd a public object. Whatever else his works were "about," they also managed to be about democracy. But by our day the democratic dream had become too shaky a structure to support the furious pressures of the artist's doubt. And as always when the belief which nurtures a great social myth declines, large sections of society become prey to superstition. For man without myth is Othello with Desdemona gone: chaos descends, faith vanishes and superstitions prowl in the mind.

Hard-boiled writing is said to appeal through its presentation of sheer fact, rather than through rhetoric. The writer puts nothing

down but what he pragmatically "knows." But actually one "fact"

itself—which in literature must be presented simultaneously as image and as event—became a rhetorical unit. And the symbolic ritual which has set o the "fact"—that is, the fact unorganized by vital social myths (which might incorporate the ndings of science and still contain elements of mystery)—is the rite of superstition.

The superstitious individual responds to the capricious event, the fact that seems to explode in his face through blind fatality. For it is the creative function of myth to protect the individual from the irrational, and since it is here in the realm of the irrational that, impervious to science, the stereotype grows, we see that the Negro stereotype is really an image of the unorganized, irrational forces of American life, forces through which, by projecting them in forms of images of an easily dominated minority, the white individual seeks to be at home in the vast unknown world of America. Perhaps the object of the stereotype is not so much to crush the Negro as to console the white man.

Certainly there is justi cation for this view when we consider the work of William Faulkner. In Faulkner most of the relationships which we have pointed out between the Negro and contemporary writing come to focus: the social and the personal, the moral and the technical, the nineteenth-century emphasis upon morality and the modern accent upon personal myth. And on the strictly literary level Faulkner is proli c and complex

enough to speak for those Southern writers who are aggressively anti-Negro and for those younger writers who appear most sincerely interested in depicting the Negro as a rounded human being. What is more, he is the greatest artist the South has produced. While too complex to be given more than a glance in these notes, even a glance is more revealing of what lies back of the distortion of the Negro in modern writing than any attempt at a group survey might be.

Faulkner's attitude is mixed. Taking his cue from the Southern mentality in which the Negro is often dissociated into a malignant stereotype (the bad nigger) on the one hand and a benign stereotype (the good nigger) on the other, most often Faulkner presents

characters embodying both. The dual function of this dissociation seems to be that of avoiding moral pain and thus to justify the South's racial code. But since such a social order harms whites no less than blacks, the sensitive Southerner, the artist, is apt to feel its e ects acutely—and within the deepest levels of his personality. For not only is the social division forced upon the Negro by the ritualized ethic of discrimination, but upon the white man by the strictly enforced set of anti-Negro taboos. The con ict is always with him. Indeed, so rigidly has the recognition of Negro humanity been tabooed that the white Southerner is apt to associate any form of personal rebellion with the Negro. So that for the Southern artist the Negro becomes a symbol of his personal rebellion, his guilt and his repression of it. The Negro is thus a compelling object of fascination, and this we see very clearly in Faulkner.

Sometimes in Faulkner the Negro is simply a villain, but by an unconsciously ironic transvaluation his villainy consists, as with Loosh in *The Unvanquished*, of desiring his freedom. Or again the Negro appears benign, as with Ringo, of the same novel, who uses his talent not to seek personal freedom but to remain the loyal and resourceful retainer. Not that I criticize loyalty in itself, but that loyalty given where one's humanity is unrecognized seems a bit obscene. And yet in Faulkner's story "The Bear," he brings us as close to the moral implication of the Negro as Twain or Melville. In the famous "di cult" fourth section, which Malcolm Cowley advises us to skip very much as Hemingway would have us skip the end of *Huckleberry Finn*, we nd an argument in progress in which one voice (that

of a Southern abolitionist) seeks to de ne Negro humanity against the other's enumeration of those stereotypes which many Southerners believe to be the Negro's basic traits.

Signi cantly, the mentor of the young hero of this story, a man of great moral stature, is socially a Negro.

Indeed, through his many novels and short stories Faulkner ghts out the moral problem which was repressed after the nineteenth century, and it was shocking for some to discover that for all his concern with the South, Faulkner was actually seeking out the nature of man. Thus we must turn to him for that continuity of

moral purpose which made for the greatness of our classics. As for the Negro minority, he has been more willing perhaps than any other artist to start with the stereotype, accept it as true, and then seek out the human truth which it hides. Perhaps his is the example for our writers to follow, for in his work technique has been put once more to the task of creating value.

Which leaves these nal things to be said. First, that this is meant as no plea for white writers to de ne Negro humanity, but to recognize the broader aspects of their own. Secondly, Negro writers and those of the other minorities have their own task of contributing to the total image of the American by depicting the experience of their own groups. Certainly theirs is the task of de ning Negro humanity, as this can no more be accomplished by others than freedom, which must be won again and again each day, can be conferred upon another. A people must de ne itself, and minorities have the responsibility of having their ideals and images recognized as part of the composite image which is that of the still-forming American people.

The other thing to be said is that while it is unlikely that American writing will ever retrace the way to the nineteenth century, it might be worthwhile to point out that for all its technical experimentation it is nevertheless an ethical instrument, and as such might well exercise some choice in the kind of ethic it prefers to support. The artist is no freer than the society in which he lives, and in the United States the writers who stereotype or ignore the Negro and other minorities in the nal analysis stereotype and distort their

own humanity. Mark Twain knew that in *his* America humanity masked its face with blackness.

Written in 1946. Published in *Con uence*, December 1953.

*Perhaps the ideal approach to the work of literature would be one allowing for insight

into the deepest psychological motives of the writer at the same time that it examined all external sociological factors operating within a given milieu. For while objectively a social reality, the work of art is, in its genesis, a projection of a deeply personal process, and any approach that ignores the personal at the expense of the social is necessarily incomplete.

Thus, when we approach contemporary writing from the perspective of segregation, as is commonly done by sociologically minded thinkers, we automatically limit ourselves to one external aspect of a complex whole, which leaves us little to say concerning its personal, internal elements. On the other hand, American writing has been one of the most important twentieth-century literatures, and though negative as a social force it is technically brilliant and emotionally powerful. Hence were we to examine it for its embodiment of these positive values, there would be other more admiring things to be said.

Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke *This essay originated in the form of a letter in which, from Rome, I expressed my reactions to a lecture which Stanley Edgar Hyman, an old friend and intellectual sparring partner, was preparing for what was to be the rst of the Ludwig Lewisohn lectures at Brandeis University.*

Hyman wrote back suggesting that I work up my ideas as part of a publishable debate, and the two essays were presented in Partisan Review, *Spring 1958. They were titled "The Negro Writer in America: An Exchange," and they are apt to yield their maximum return when read together. Hyman's part of the exchange, which is a most useful discussion of the Negro American's relation to the folk tradition, appears in his book of essays and reviews,* The Promised End, *published by The World Publishing Company, 1963.*

STANLEY Edgar Hyman’s essay on the relationship between Negro American literature and Negro American folklore concerns matters in which my own interest is such that the very news of his piece aroused my enthusiasm. Yet after reading it I nd that our conceptions of the way in which folk tradition gets into literature—

and especially into the novel; our conceptions of just what is *Negro* and what is *American* in Negro American folklore, and our conceptions of a Negro American writer’s environment—are at such odds that I must disagree with him all along the way. And since much of his essay is given over so generously to aspects of my own meager writings, I am put in the ungrateful—and embarrassing—

position of not only evaluating some of his statements from that highly dubious (but privileged) sanctuary provided by one’s intimate knowledge of one’s personal history, but of questioning some of his readings of my own novel by consulting the text.

Archetypes, like taxes, seem doomed to be with us always, and so with literature, one hopes; but between the two there must needs be the living human being in a speci c texture of time, place and circumstance who must respond, make choices, achieve eloquence and create speci c works of art. Thus I feel that Hyman’s fascination with folk tradition and the pleasure of archetype-hunting leads to a critical game that ignores the speci city of literary works. And it also causes him to blur the distinction between various archetypes and di erent currents of American folklore, and generally to oversimplify the American tradition.

Hyman’s favorite archetypical gure is the trickster, but I see a danger here. From a proper distance *all* archetypes would appear to be tricksters and con dence men: part God, part man, no one seems to know he-she-its true name, because he-she-it is protean with changes of pace, location and identity. Further, the trickster is everywhere and anywhere at one and the same time, and, like the parts of some dismembered god, is likely to be found on stony as well as on fertile ground. Folklore is somewhat more stable, in its identity if not in its genealogy, but even here, if we are to discuss *Negro* American folklore let us not be led astray by interlopers.

Certainly we should not approach Negro folklore through the gure Hyman calls the " 'darky' entertainer." For even though such performers as he mentions appear to be convenient guides, they lead us elsewhere, into a Cthonic labyrinth. The role with which they are identi ed is not, despite its "blackness," *Negro* American (indeed, Negroes are repelled by it); it does not nd its popularity among Negroes but among whites; and although it resembles the role of the clown familiar to Negro variety-house audiences, it derives not from the Negro but from the Anglo-Saxon branch of American folklore. In other words, this " 'darky' entertainer" is white. Nevertheless, it might be worthwhile to follow the trail for a while, even though we seem more interested in interracial warfare than the question of literature.

These entertainers are, as Hyman explains, professionals, who in order to enact a symbolic role basic to the underlying drama of American society assume a ritual mask—the identical mask and role

taken on by white minstrel men when *they* depicted comic Negroes.

Social changes occurring since the 1930s have made for certain modi cations (Rochester operates in a di erent climate of rhetoric, say, than did Stepin Fetchit), but the mask, stylized and iconic, was once required of anyone who would act the role—even those Negroes whose natural coloration should, for any less ritualistic purposes at least, have made it unnecessary.

Nor does the role, which makes use of Negro idiom, songs, dance motifs and wordplay, grow out of the Negro American sense of the comic (although we too have our comedy of blackness), but out of the white American's Manichean fascination with the symbolism of blackness and whiteness expressed in such contradictions as the con ict between the white American's Judeo-Christian morality, his democratic political ideals and his daily conduct—indeed in his general anti-tragic approach to experience.

Being "highly pigmented," as the sociologists say, it was our Negro "misfortune" to be caught up associatively in the negative side of this basic dualism of the white folk mind, and to be shackled to almost everything it would repress from conscience and consciousness. The physical hardships

and indignities of slavery were benign compared with this continuing debasement of our image. Because these things are bound up with their notion of chaos, it is almost impossible for many whites to consider questions of sex, women, economic opportunity, the national identity, historic change, social justice—even the “criminality” implicit in the broadening of freedom itself—without summoning malignant images of black men into consciousness.

In the Anglo-Saxon branch of American folklore and in the entertainment industry (which thrives on the exploitation and debasement of all folk materials), the Negro is reduced to a negative sign that usually appears in a comedy of the grotesque and the unacceptable. As Constance Rourke has made us aware, the action of the early minstrel show—with its Negro-derived choreography, its ringing of banjos and rattling of bones, its voices cackling jokes in pseudo-Negro dialect, with its nonsense songs, its bright costumes and sweating performers—constituted a ritual of exorcism. Other

white cultures had their gollywogs and blackamoors, but the fact of Negro slavery went to the moral heart of the American social drama, and here the Negro was too real for easy fantasy, too serious to be dealt with in anything less than a national art. The mask was an inseparable part of the national iconography. Thus even when a Negro acted in an abstract role, the national implications were unchanged. His costume made use of the “sacred” symbolism of the American ag—with red and white striped pants and coat, and with stars set in a eld of blue for a collar—but he could appear only with his hands gloved in white and his face blackened with burnt cork or greasepaint.

This mask, this willful stylization and modi cation of the natural face and hands, was imperative for the evocation of that atmosphere in which the fascination of blackness could be enjoyed, the comic catharsis achieved. The racial identity of the performer was unimportant, the mask was the thing (the “thing” in more ways than one), and its function was to veil the humanity of Negroes thus reduced to a sign, and to repress the white audience’s awareness of its moral identi cation with its own acts and with the human ambiguities pushed behind the mask.

Hyman sees the comic point of the contemporary Negro's performance of the role as arising from the circumstance that a skilled man of intelligence is parodying a subhuman grotesque; this is all very kind, but when we move in from the wide-ranging spaces of the archetype for a closer inspection we see that the speci c rhetorical situation involves the self-humiliation of the "sacri cial"

gure, and that a psychological dissociation from this symbolic self-maiming is one of the powerful motives at work in the audience.

Motives of race, Status, economics and guilt are always clustered here. The comic point is inseparable from the racial identity of the performer—as is clear in Hyman's example from Wright's *Black Boy*

—who by assuming the group-debasing role for gain not only substantiates the audience's belief in the "blackness" of things black, but relieves it, with dreamlike e ciency, of its guilt by accepting the very pro t motive that was involved in the designation of the Negro as national scapegoat in the rst place. There are all kinds of

comedy: here one is reminded of the tribesman in *Green Hills of Africa* who hid his laughing face in shame at the sight of a gut-shot hyena jerking out its own intestines and eating them, in Hemingway's words, "with relish."

Down at the deep dark bottom of the melting pot, where the private is public and the public private, where black is white and white black, where the immoral becomes moral and the moral is anything that makes one feel good (or that one has the power to sustain), the white man's relish is apt to be the black man's gall.

It is not at all odd that this blackfaced gure of white fun is for Negroes a symbol of everything they rejected in the white man's thinking about race, in themselves and in their own group. When he appears, for example, in the guise of Nigger Jim, the Negro is made uncomfortable. Writing at a time when the blackface minstrel was still popular, and shortly after a war which left even the abolitionists weary of those problems associated with the Negro, Twain tted Jim into the outlines of the minstrel tradition, and it is from behind this stereotype mask that we see Jim's dignity and human

capacity—and Twain's complexity—emerge. Yet it is his source in this same tradition which creates that ambivalence between his identi cation as an adult and parent and his "boyish"

naïveté, and which by contrast makes Huck, with his street-sparrow sophistication, seem more adult. Certainly it upsets a Negro reader, and it o ers a less psychoanalytical explanation of the discomfort which lay behind Leslie Fiedler's thesis concerning the relation of Jim and Huck in his essay "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!"

A glance at a more recent ctional encounter between a Negro adult and a white boy, that of Lucas Beauchamp and Chick Mallison in Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*, will reinforce my point. For all the racial and caste di erences between them, Lucas holds the ascendency in his mature dignity over the youthful Mallison and refuses to lower himself in the comic duel of status forced on him by the white boy whose life he has saved. Faulkner was free to reject the confusion between manhood and the Negro's caste status which is sanctioned by white Southern tradition, but Twain, standing

closer to the Reconstruction and to the oral tradition, was not so free of the white dictum that Negro males must be treated either as boys or "uncles'—never as men. Jim's friendship for Huck comes across as that of a boy for another boy rather than as the friendship of an adult for a junior; thus there is implicit in it not only a violation of the manners sanctioned by society for relations between Negroes and whites but also a violation of our conception of adult maleness.

In Jim the extremes of the private and the public come into focus, and before our eyes an "archetypal" gure gives way before the realism implicit in the form of the novel. Here we have, I believe, an explanation in the novel's own terms of that ambiguity which bothered Fiedler. Fiedler was accused of mere sensationalism when he named the friendship homosexual, yet I believe him so profoundly disturbed by the manner in which the deep dichotomies symbolized by blackness and whiteness are resolved that, forgetting to look at the speci c form of the novel, he leaped squarely into the middle of that tangle of symbolism which he is dedicated to unsnarling, and yelled out his most terrifying name for chaos. Other things being equal, he might have called it "rape," "incest,"

“parricide” or “miscegenation.” It is ironic that what to a Negro appears to be a lost fall in Twain’s otherwise successful wrestle with the ambiguous gure in blackface, is viewed by a critic as a symbolic loss of sexual identity. Surely for literature there is some rare richness here.

Although the gure in blackface looks suspiciously homegrown, Western and Calvinist to me, Hyman identi es it as being related to an archetypical trickster gure originating in Africa. Without arguing the point I shall say only that if it *is a* trickster, its adjustment to the contours of “white” symbolic needs is far more intriguing than its alleged origins, for it tells us something of the operation of American values as modulated by folklore and literature. We are back once more to questions of order and chaos, illusion and reality, nonentity and identity.

The trickster, according to Karl Kerenyi (in a commentary included in Paul Radin’s study, *The Trickster)*, represents a

personi cation of the body

which is … never wholly subdued, ruled by lust and hunger, forever running into pain and injury, cunning and stupid in action. Disorder belonging to the totality of life … the spirit of this disorder is the trickster. His function in an archaic society, or rather the function of his mythology, of the tales told about him, is to add disorder to order and to make a whole, to render possible, within the xed bounds of what is permitted, an experience of what is not permitted.…

But ours is no archaic society (although its archaic elements exert far more in uence in our lives than we care to admit), and it is an ironic reversal that in what is regarded as the most “open” society in the world, the license of the black trickster gure is limited by the rigidities of racial attitudes, by political expediencies and by the guilt bound up with the white compulsion to identify with the ever-present man of esh and blood whose irremediable features have been expropriated for “immoral” purposes. Hyman, incidentally, would have found in Louis Armstrong a much better example of the trickster, his medium being music rather than words and pantomime. Armstrong’s clownish license and intoxicating powers are almost Elizabethan; he takes liberties with kings, queens and presidents; he

emphasizes the physicality of his music with sweat, spittle and facial contortions; he performs the magical feat of making romantic melody issue from a throat of gravel; and some few years ago was recommending to all and sundry his personal physic, “Pluto Water,” as a purging way to health, happiness and international peace.

When the white man steps behind the mask of the trickster his freedom is circumscribed by the fear that he is not simply miming a personi cation of his disorder and chaos, but that he will become in fact that which he intends only to symbolize; that he will be trapped somewhere in the mystery of hell (for there is a mystery in the whiteness of blackness, the innocence of evil and the evil of innocence, though, being initiates, Negroes express the joke of it in the blues), and thus lose that freedom which, in the uid,

“traditionless,” “classless” and rapidly changing society, he would recognize as the white man’s alone.

Here another ironic facet of the old American problem of identity crops up. For out of the counterfeiting of the black American’s identity there arises a profound doubt in the white man’s mind as to the authenticity of his own image of himself. He, after all, went into the business when he refused the king’s shilling and revolted. He had put on a mask of his own, as it were, and when we regard our concern with identity in the light of what Robert Penn Warren has termed the “intentional” character of our national beginnings, a quotation from W. B. Yeats proves highly meaningful: There is a relation between discipline and the theatrical sense. If we cannot imagine ourselves as di erent from what we are and assume the second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves, though we may accept one from others. Active virtue, as distinct from the passive acceptance of a current code, is the wearing of a mask. It is the condition of an arduous fall life.

For the ex-colonials, the declaration of an American identity meant the assumption of a mask, and it imposed not only the discipline of national selfconsciousness, but gave Americans an ironic awareness of the joke that always lies between appearance and reality, between the discontinuity of social tradition and that sense of the past which clings to the mind. And

perhaps even an awareness of the joke that society is man's creation, not God's.

Americans began their revolt from the English fatherland when they dumped the tea into the Boston Harbor masked as Indians, and the mobility of the society created in this limitless space has encouraged the use of the mask for good and evil ever since. As the advertising industry, which is dedicated to the creation of masks, makes clear, that which cannot gain authority from tradition may borrow it with a mask. Masking is a play upon possibility and ours is a society in which possibilities are many. When American life is most American it is apt to be most theatrical.

And it is this which makes me question Hyman's designation of the "smart man playing dumb" role as primarily Negro, if he means

by "con ict situations" those in which racial pressure is uppermost.

Actually it is a role which Negroes share with other Americans, and it might be more "Yankee" than anything else. It is a strategy common to the culture, and it is reinforced by our anti-intellectualism, by our tendency toward conformity and by the related desire of the individual to be left alone; often simply by the desire to put more money in the bank. But basically the strategy grows out of our awareness of the joke at the center of the American identity. Said a very dark Southern friend of mine in laughing reply to a white businessman who complained of his recalcitrance in a bargaining situation, "I know, you thought I was colored, didn't you." It is across this joke that Negro and white Americans regard one another. The white American has charged the Negro American with being without past or tradition (something which strikes the white man with a nameless horror), just as he himself has been so charged by European and American critics with a nostalgia for the stability once typical of European cultures, and the Negro knows that both were "mammy-made" right here at home. What's more, each secretly believes that he alone knows what is valid in the American experience, and that the other knows he knows but will not admit it, and each suspects the other of being at bottom a phony.

The white man's half-conscious awareness that his image of the Negro is false makes him suspect the Negro of always seeking to take him in, and

assume his motives are anger and fear—which very often they are. On his side of the joke the Negro looks at the white man and nds it di cult to believe that the “grays”—a Negro term for white people—can be so absurdly self-deluded over the true interrelatedness of blackness and whiteness. To him the white man seems a hypocrite who boasts of a pure identity while standing with his humanity exposed to the world.

Very often, however, the Negro’s masking is motivated not so much by fear as by a profound rejection of the image created to usurp his identity. Sometimes it is for the sheer joy of the joke; sometimes to challenge those who presume, across the psychological distance created by race manners, to know his identity. Nonetheless

it is in the American grain. Benjamin Franklin, the practical scientist, skilled statesman and sophisticated lover, allowed the French to mistake him for Rousseau’s Natural Man. Hemingway poses as a nonliterary sportsman, Faulkner as a farmer; Abe Lincoln allowed himself to be taken for a simple country lawyer—until the chips were down. Here the “darky” act makes brothers of us all.

America is a land of masking jokers. We wear the mask for purposes of aggression as well as for defense, when we are projecting the future and preserving the past. In short, the motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals.

My basic quarrel with Hyman is not over his belief in the importance of the folk tradition, nor over his interest in archetypes, but over his tendency, when he turns to speci c works of literature, to distort their content to t his theory. Since he refers so generously to my own novel, let us take it as a case in point. So intense is Hyman’s search for archetypical forms that he doesn’t see that the narrator’s grandfather in *Invisible Man* is no more involved in a “darky” act than was Ulysses in Polyphemus’ cave. Nor is he so much a “smart-man-playing-dumb” as a weak man who knows the nature of his oppressor’s weakness. There is a good deal of spite in the old man, as there comes to be in his grandson, and the strategy he advises is a kind of jiujitsu of the spirit, a denial and rejection through agreement. Samson, eyeless in Gaza, pulls the building down when his strength returns; politically weak, the grandfather has learned that conformity leads to a

similar end, and so advises his children. Thus his mask of meekness conceals the wisdom of one who has learned the secret of saying the “yes” which accomplishes the expressive “no.” Here, too, is a rejection of a current code and a denial become metaphysical. More important to the novel is the fact that he represents the ambiguity of the past for the hero, for whom his sphinxlike deathbed advice poses a riddle which points the plot in the dual direction which the hero will follow throughout the novel.

Certainly B. P. Rhinehart (the P. is for “Proteus,” the B. for

“Bliss”) would seem the perfect example of Hyman’s trickster gure.

He is a cunning man who wins the admiration of those who admire

skulduggery and know-how, an American virtuoso of identity who thrives on chaos and swift change; he is greedy, in that his masquerade is motivated by money as well as by the sheer bliss of impersonation; he is godlike, in that he brings new techniques—

electric guitars, etc.—to the service of God, and in that there are many men in his image while he is himself unseen; he is phallic in his role of “lover”; as a numbers runner he is a bringer of manna and a worker of miracles, in that he transforms (for winners, of course) pennies into dollars, and thus he feeds (and feeds on) the poor. Indeed, one could extend this list in the manner of much myth-mongering criticism until the

ction dissolved into

anthropology, but Rhinehart's role in the formal structure of the narrative is to suggest to the hero a mode of escape from Ras, and a means of applying, in yet another form, his grandfather's cryptic advice to his own situation. One could throw Rhinehart among his literary betters and link him with Mann's Felix Knill, the Baron Clappique of Malraux's *Man's Fate* and many others, but that would be to make a game of criticism and really say nothing.

The identity of ctional characters is determined by the implicit realism of the form, not by their relation to tradition; they are what they do or do not do. Archetypes are timeless, novels are time-haunted. Novels achieve timelessness through time. If the symbols appearing in a novel link up with those of universal myth they do so by virtue of their emergence from the speci c texture of a speci c form of social reality. The nal act of *Invisible Man* is not that of a concealment in darkness in the Anglo-Saxon connotation of the word, but that of a voice issuing its little wisdom out of the substance of its own inwardness—after having undergone a transformation from ranter to writer. If, by the way, the hero is pulling a "darky act" in this, he certainly is not a smart man playing dumb. For the novel, his memoir, is one long, loud rant, howl and laugh. Confession, not concealment, is his mode. His mobility is dual: geographical, as Hyman points out, but, more importantly, it is intellectual. And in keeping with the reverse English of the plot, and with the Negro American conception of blackness, his movement vertically downward (not into a "sewer," Freud

notwithstanding, but into a coal cellar, a source of heat, light, power and, through association with the character's motivation, self-perception) is a process of *rising* to an understanding of his human condition. He gets his restless mobility not so much from the blues or from sociology but because he appears in a literary form which has time and social change as its special province. Besides, restlessness of the spirit is an American condition that transcends geography, sociology and past condition of servitude.

Discussions of folk tradition and literature which slight the speci c literary forms involved seem to me questionable. Most of the writers whom Hyman

mentions are novelists, workers in a form which has absorbed folk tradition into its thematic structures, its plots, symbolism and rhetoric, and which has its special way with folklore as it has with manners, history, sociology and psychology.

Besides, novelists in our time are more likely to be inspired by reading novels than by their acquaintance with any folk tradition.

I use folklore in my work not because I am Negro, but because writers like Eliot and Joyce made me conscious of the literary value of my folk inheritance. My cultural background, like that of most Americans, is dual (my middle name, sadly enough, is Waldo).

I knew the trickster Ulysses just as early as I knew the wily rabbit of Negro American lore, and I could easily imagine myself a pint-sized Ulysses but hardly a rabbit, no matter how human and resourceful or Negro. And a little later I could imagine myself as Huck Finn (I so nicknamed my brother), but not, though I racially identi ed with him, as Nigger Jim, who struck me as a white man's inadequate portrait of a slave.

My point is that the Negro American writer is also an heir of the human experience which is literature, and this might well be more important to him than his living folk tradition. For me, at least, in the discontinuous, swiftly changing and diverse American culture, the stability of the Negro American folk tradition became precious as a result of an act of literary discovery. Taken as a whole, its spirituals along with its blues, jazz and folk tales, it has, as Hyman suggests, much to tell us of the faith, humor and adaptability to reality necessary to live in a world which has taken on much of the

insecurity and blueslike absurdity known to those who brought it into being. For those who are able to translate its meanings into wider, more precise vocabularies it has much to o er indeed.

Hyman performs a service when he makes us aware that Negro American folk tradition constitutes a valuable source for literature, but for the novelist of any cultural or racial identity, his form is his greatest freedom, and his insights are where he nds them.

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Stephen Crane and the Mainstream of American Fiction OF all our nineteenth-century masters of ction—Hawthorne, Melville, Henry James, Mark Twain and Stephen Crane—it was Crane, the youngest, arrived most distantly from the Civil War in point of time, who was the most war-haunted. Born in Newark, New Jersey, six years after the ring ceased, Crane was the youngest of fourteen o spring of parents whose marriage marked the union of two lines of hard-preaching, fundamentalist Methodist ministers.

The time and place of his birth and his parents' concern with conduct, morality and eloquence were, when joined with his self-dedication to precise feeling and writing, perhaps as portentous and as di cult a gift to bear as any seer's obligation to peer through walls and into the secret places of the heart, or around windy corners and into the enigmatic future. Indeed, such words as

"clairvoyant," "occult" and "uncanny" have been used to describe his style, and while these tell us little, there was nonetheless an inescapable aura of the marvelous about Stephen Crane. For although there is no record of his eyes having been covered at birth with that caul which is said to grant one second sight, he revealed a unique vision of the human condition and an unusual talent for projecting it. His was a costly vision, won through personal su ering, hard living and harsh artistic discipline, and by the time of his death, at twenty-nine, he was recognized as one of the important innovators of American ctional prose and master of a powerful and original style.

Fortunately it was the style and not the myth which was important. Thus today, after sixty years during which there was little interest in the meaning and sources of Crane's art, the best of the work remains not only alive but capable of speaking to us with a new resonance of meaning. While recent criticism holds that the pioneer style, which leads directly to Ernest Hemingway, sprang

from a dedication to the moral and aesthetic possibilities of literary form similar to that of Henry James, Crane's dedication to art was no less

disciplined or deadly serious than that which characterized his preaching forefathers' concern with religion. Indeed, John Berryman and Robert Wooster Stallman, the most perceptive of Crane's recent critics, see much of the tension in the work as arising from his desperate struggle with the rejected angel of his parents'

Methodism—an insight which we nd highly suggestive.

Surely if fundamentalist Christianity could get so authoritatively into national politics (especially in the Bible Belt), so ambiguously into our system of education (as in the Scopes trial issue), into our style of crime (through Prohibition's spawn of bootleggers, gangsters, jellybeans and appers), and so powerfully into jazz, it is about time we recognized its deeper relationship to the art of our twentieth-century literature. And not simply as subject matter, but as a major source of its technique, its form and rhetoric. For while much has been made of the role of the high church in the development of modern poetry, and with Kierkegaard become a household god for many contemporary novelists, Crane's example suggests that for the writer a youthful contact with the emotional intensity and harsh authority of American fundamentalism can be as important an experience as contact with those churches which possess a ritual containing elements of high art and a theology spun subtle and ne through intellectualization. Undoubtedly the Methodist Church provided Crane an early schooling in the seriousness of spiritual questions—of the individual's ultimate relationship to his fellow men, to the universe and to God—and was one source of the youthful revolt which taught him to look upon life with his own eyes. Just as important, perhaps, is the discipline which the church provided him in keeping great emotion under the control of the intellect, as during the exciting services (which the boy learned to question quite early), along with an awareness of the disparity between the individual's public testimony (a rite common to evangelical churches) and his private deeds—a matter intensi ed by the fact that the celebrant of this rite of public confession was his own father. In brief, Crane was concerned very early with private

emotions publicly displayed as an act of puri cation and self-de nition, an excellent beginning for a writer interested in the ordeals of the private individual struggling to de ne himself as against the claims of society.

Crane, who might well have become a minister, turned from religion but transferred its forms to his art.

For his contemporaries much of the meaning of Crane's art was obscured by a personal myth compounded of elements ever fascinating to the American mind: his youth and his early mastery of a di cult and highly technical skill (like a precocious juvenile delinquent possessed of an uncanny knowledge not of pocket pool, craps or tap dancing, but of advanced literary technique), coupled with that highly individual way of feeling and thinking which is the basis of all signi cant innovation in art; his wild bohemian way of life; his maverick attitude toward respectability; his gallantry toward prostitutes no less than toward their respectable sisters; his friendship with Bowery outcasts ("What Must I Do to Be Saved?"

was the title of a tract by his mother's uncle, the Methodist Bishop of Syracuse and a founder of the university there); his gambler's prodigality with fame and money; his search for wars to observe and report; and nally the fatality of "genius" which followed the fair, slight, gifted youth from obscurity to association with the wealthy and gifted in England (Joseph Conrad, H. G. Wells, Ford Madox Ford and Henry James were among his friends), to his death from tuberculosis, one of the period's most feared and romanticized scourges, in the far Black Forest of Germany.

Blind to the cost of his knowledge, many of his contemporaries regarded Crane's adventures as undertaken merely to provide them with entertainment: Crane chasing bandits in Mexico; Crane shipwrecked while running guns to Cuba; Crane reporting the Greco-Turkish War; Crane taking on the New York police force and being obliged to abandon the city; Crane marrying a woman said to have been an ex-madam; Crane on a spree. And there was, in fact, some truth to their assumption. Crane was as gifted at acting out good newspaper copy as Hemingway or F. Scott Fitzgerald were to be, and no less a delight to the reporters.

Yet despite the headlines and malicious gossip concerning his wife's past (which motivated their taking up residence in England), the ction presented here testi es that whatever else Crane might have been seeking, the playboy author was engaged in a most desperate moral struggle. At a time when the capacity for moral seriousness appeared to have disappeared from

American society, Crane was attempting to live his own life as cleanly, as imaginatively, and with as much immediacy and realistic poetry as he aspired to convey in his writing. If there was something of the entertainer in his public role (and this was still the time of that great popular entertainer, Mark Twain), there was also an element of the self-sacri cial, and the sensational features of the public adventures hint at the cost of the art. There was in Crane something of Emerson and Thoreau as well as the fundamentalist moralist-designate, and the quiet, desperate, unthinking life was to be avoided at the cost of life itself.

At the center of Crane's myth there lay, of course, the mystery of the creative talent with which a youth of twenty-one was able to write what is considered one of the world's foremost war novels when he had neither observed nor participated in combat. And, indeed, with this second book, *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane burst upon the American public with the e ect of a Civil War projectile lain dormant beneath a city square for thirty years. Two years before he had appeared with *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, a stripped little novel of social protest written in a strange new idiom.

But although Flamlin Garland and William Dean Howells had recognized the work's importance, the reading public was prepared neither for such a close look at the devastating e ect of the Bowery upon the individual's sense of life, nor for the narrow choice between the sweatshop and prostitution which Crane saw as the fate of such girls as Maggie. Besides, with its ear attuned to the languid accents of genteel ction, it was unprepared for the harsh, although o beat, poetic realism of Crane's idiom.

In a famous inscription in which he exhorted a reader to have the

"courage" to read his book to the end, Crane explained that he had tried to show that

environment is a tremendous thing in the world, and frequently shapes lives regardless. If one proves that theory, one makes room in heaven for all sorts of souls, notably an occasional street girl, who are not con dently expected to be there by many excellent people.…

Crane's statement reveals that the young author knew the mood of his prospective audience much better than it was prepared to know him. For although Crane published *Maggie* at his own expense (signi cantly, under a pseudonym) and paid four men to read it conspicuously while traveling up and down Manhattan on the El, it failed.

This was for American literature a most signi cant failure; indeed; afterward, following *Maggie*, Crane developed the strategy of understatement and the technique of impressionism which was to point the way for Hemingway and our ction of the twenties. Crane was not to return to an explicit projection of his social criticism until "The Monster," a work written much later in his career; he turned, instead, to exploring the psychology of the individual under extreme pressure. *Maggie*, which is omitted here in favor of the neglected and more mature "The Monster," stands with *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as one of the parents of the modern American novel, but it is *The Red Badge of Courage* which claims our attention with all the authority of a masterpiece.

One cannot help but feel, however, that the romantic mystery made of the fact that Crane had no direct experience of war before writing *The Red Badge* has served to obscure much of its true importance. For even while rejecting the assumption that the creative act is completely accountable, it is evident that Crane was the type of writer upon whom, to use Henry James's phrase,

"nothing was lost," and the possessor of an imagination for which minor experiences ever revealed their more universal implications.

It is not necessary for even the most unimaginative of us to be consumed by ame in order to envision hell re—the hot head of a match against the ngernail su ces—and the embers of the Civil War, let us recall, had far from ceased their burning in the American mind.

We know that one of Crane's brothers was an expert on the Civil War; that while attending the Hudson River Institute at Claverack, N.Y., Crane had listened to the exciting war experiences of Lieutenant John Van Petten, a hero of the old 34th New York, then teaching elocution and drill at the little military academy; that he possessed an excellent memory for detail and a

marvelous ear for speech accents, rhythms and idioms; and that as a college athlete he had gained some notion of the psychology of men engaged in mass action while on the football eld. As for his concern with the ambiguities of fear and of courage, cowardice and heroism, and the problem of the relation of the individual to the group and to God, these were a part of his religious and family background, while the deeper insights were available to him (as they are to each of us) through a ruthless plunging into the dark depths of his own heart and mind. More than this, we know truly that although the ghting had ceased six years before Crane's birth, the moral climate which it created formed the only climate Crane was ever to know. Having been born in the world which the war had brought into being, much of his activity was a search for ways of living within it with meaningful intensity. Historically wars and revolutions form the background for the high periods of the novel, and civil wars, Hemingway has written, are the best wars for the writer. To which we would add, yes, because they have a way of continuing long after wars between nations are resolved; because, with the combatants being the same people, civil wars are never really won; and because their most devastating engagements are fought within the individual human heart.

For all our e orts to forget it, the Civil War was the great shaping event not only of our political and economic life, but following Crane, of our twentieth-century ction. It was the agency through which many of the con icting elements within the old republic were brought to maximum tension, leaving us a nation fully aware of the continental character of our destiny, preparing the emergence of our predominantly industrial economy and our increasingly urban way of life, and transforming us from a nation consisting of two major regions which could pretend to a unity of values despite their basic

split over fundamental issues, to one which was now consciously divided. To put it drastically, if war, as Clausewitz insisted, is the continuation of politics by other means, it requires little imagination to see American life since the abandonment of the Reconstruction as an abrupt reversal of that formula: the continuation of the Civil War by means other than arms. In this sense the con ict has not only gone unresolved, but the line between civil war and civil peace has become so blurred as to require of the sensitive man

a questioning attitude toward every aspect of the nation's self-image. Stephen Crane, in his time, was such a man.

The America into which Crane was born was one of mirrorlike reversals in which the victors were the defeated and the defeated the victors; with the South, its memory frozen at the xed moment of its surrender, carrying its aggression to the North in the form of guerrilla politics, and with the North, compromising as it went, retreating swiftly into the vast expanse of its new industrial development, eager to lose any memory traces of those values for which it had gone to war. Mark Twain had attacked this postwar society, infamous for its carpetbaggers, its Hayes-Tilden Compromise, its looting of the nation's resources during the Grant administrations, in "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg," and Henry James depicted the inversion of its moral values in *The Bostonians* and was stimulated by it to those subtleties of moral perception which inform his major ction. For all of this, however, Twain's bitter satire was taken for comedy and the best of James was left unread. Despite the prosperity and apparent openness and freedom of the society, it was as though a rigid national censorship had been imposed—and not by an apparatus set up in Washington, but within the center of the American mind. Now there was much of which Americans were morally aware but little which they wished to confront in literature, and the compelling of such confrontation was the challenge ung down to Crane by history.

Let us not forget, then, that while the setting of *The Red Badge* is the Civil War, its issues are drawn from the lax society of the eighteen-eighties and nineties, a society which Crane viewed as hostile to those who would achieve manhood and moral identity,

whose tendency toward moral evasion he set out to overcome with his technique of understatement, and whose capacity for reality and moral responsibility he sought to ensnare through the realistic poetry of his diction.

Thus, in *The Red Badge* social reality is ltered through the sensibility of a young Northern soldier who is only vaguely aware of the larger issues of the war, and we note that for all the complex use of the symbolic connotations of blackness, only one Negro, a dancing teamster, appears

throughout the novel. The reader is left to ll in the understated background, to recreate those matters of which the hero, Henry Fleming, is too young, too self-centered and too concerned with the more immediate problems of courage, honor and self-preservation to be aware. This leaves the real test of moral courage as much a challenge to the reader as to the hero; he must decide for himself whether or not to confront the public issues evoked by Henry's private ordeal. *The Red Badge* is a novel about a lonely individual's struggle for self-de nition, written for lonely individualists, and its style, which no longer speaks in terms of the traditional American rhetoric, implies a deep skepticism as to the possibility of the old American ideals being revived by a people who had failed to live up to them after having paid so much to defend them in hardship and blood. Here in place of the conventional plot

—which implies the public validity of private experiences—we nd a series of vividly impressionistic episodes that convey the discontinuity of feeling and perception of one caught up in a vast impersonal action, and a concentration upon the psychology of one who seeks rst to secede from society and then to live in it with honor and courage.

Indeed, for a novel supposedly about the war, *The Red Badge* is intensely concerned with invasion of the private life, a theme announced when the men encounter the body of their rst dead soldier, whose shoe soles, "worn to the thinness of writing paper,"

strike Henry as evidence of a betrayal by fate which in death had exposed to the dead Confederate's enemies "that poverty which in life he had perhaps concealed from his friends." But war is nothing if not an invasion of privacy, and so is death (the "invulnerable"

dead man forces his way between the men as they open ranks to avoid him), and society more so. For society, even when reduced to a few companions, invades personality and demands of the individual an almost impossible consistency while guaranteeing the individual hardly anything. Or so it seems to the naïve Henry, much of whose anguish springs from the fear that his friends will discover that the wound which he received from the ri e butt of another frightened soldier is not the red badge of courage they assume but a badge of shame. Thus the Tattered Soldier's questions as to the

circumstance of his injury (really questions as to his moral identity) ll Henry with fear and hostility, and he regards them as the assertion of a society that probed pitilessly at secrets until all is apparent.…

His late companion's chance persistency made him feel that he could not keep his crime [of malingering] concealed in his bosom. It was sure to be brought plain by one of those arrows which cloud the air and are constantly pricking, discovering, proclaiming those things which are willed to be forever hidden. He admitted that he could not defend himself against this agency. It was not within the power of vigilance.…

In time Henry learns to act with honor and courage and to perceive something of what it means to be a man, but this perception depends upon the individual fates of those who make up his immediate group, upon the death of Jim Conklin, the most mature and responsible of the men, and upon the Loud Soldier's attainment of maturity and inner selfcon dence. But the cost of perception is primarily personal, and for Henry it depends upon the experience of the moral discomfort which follows the crimes of malingering and assuming a phony identity, and the further crime of allowing the voice of conscience, here symbolized by the Tattered Soldier, to wander o and die. Later he acquits himself bravely and comes to feel that he has attained

a quiet manhood, non-assertive but of sturdy and strong blood. He knew that he would no more quail before his guides wherever they should point. He had been to touch the great death, and found that, after all, it was but the great death. He was a man.

Obviously although Henry has been initiated into the battle of life, he has by no means nished with illusion—but that, too, is part of the human condition.

That *The Red Badge* was widely read during Crane's own time was a triumph of his art, but the real mystery lay not in his recreation of the simpler aspects of battle: the corpses, the wounds, the sound of ri e re, the panic and high elation of combat; the real mystery lay in the courage out of which one so young could face up to the truth which so many Americans were resisting with a noisy clamor of optimism and with frantic gestures of

materialistic denial. War, the jungle and hostile Nature became Crane's underlying metaphors for the human drama and the basic situations in which the individual's capacity for moral and physical courage were put to their most meaningful testing.

And so with "The Open Boat." In January 1897, Crane was one of four men who spent thirty hours in a ten-foot dinghy after their ship, bound on a gun-running expedition to Cuba, developed a leak and sank. It was from this experience that Crane shaped what is considered his most perfect short story. When "The Open Boat" is compared with the report which Crane wrote for the New York *Press*, we can see that it keeps to the order of events as they actually occurred, but such is the power of Crane's shaping vision that the reader is made to *experience* the events as a complete, dynamic, symbolic action. We become one with the men in the boat, who pit their skill and courage against the raging sea, living in their hope and despair and sharing the companionship won within the capricious hand of fate. Under the shaping grace of Crane's imagination the actual event is reduced to signi cant form, with each wave and gust of wind, each intonation of voice and gesture of limb combining toward a single e ect of meaning.

And as with most of Crane's ction, the point at issue is the cost of moral perception, of achieving an informed sense of life, in a universe which is essentially hostile to man and in which skill and courage and loyalty are virtues which help in the struggle but by no means exempt us from the necessary plunge into the storm-sea-war of experience. For it is thus and thus only that humanity is won, and

often the best are destroyed in the trial—as with Higgins, the oiler, whose skill and generosity have helped save the men from the sea but who in the end lies dead upon the shore. Through their immersion into the raging sea of life, and through Higgins's sacri cial death, the survivors are initiated into a personal knowledge of the human condition—and "when the wind brought the sound of the great sea's voice to the men on the shore … they felt that they could be interpreters."

In his essay on storytelling, Mark Twain informs us that the humorous story is especially American and that

it depends for its e ect upon the manner of its telling … [it] is told gravely; the teller doing his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it.…

It is this same noncommittal manner which Stephen Crane brings to the depiction of events which are far from humorous, and while he is seldom comic in the manner of Twain, the method gives his ction an endless complexity of meaning, and among those matters of which his style pretends unawareness are the social and historical references of his stories. Here, too, the e ect depends upon a collaboration between the teller, who conceals the range of his intention, and the listener, who must pit his sense of reality against the enigmatic order of the narrated events—as in "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," a story which dances over its apparent terrain with such a tight choreography of ironic reversals that the reader must be extremely light-footed lest he fall out of the pattern of the dance.

Scratchy Wilson, the drunken badman of deadly marksmanship, terrorizes the town and appears to have Jack Potter at his mercy—

until the unarmed marshal's announcement of his marriage unnerves him. For Scratchy, who is the last of a local gang, the news is like a "glimpse of another world," and he sees the bride as foreshadowing the end of his way of life. The point, it would seem, is that history has played a joke on Scratchy; the man with the gun is defeated by the unarmed man who has embraced those civilized values symbolized by marriage. But is this all? Doesn't the story

pivot at this point and return to the westward-moving train of its beginning?

When the marshal faces the badman's pistol it is clear that despite being unarmed he reacts out of an old habit of courage; he has fought Scratchy many times and even shot him once—in the leg (the red-topped boots with gilded imprints "of the kind beloved in winter by little sledding boys on the hillsides of New England" rob Scratchy of much of his menace for the contemporary reader). But the marshall is also sustained by a vision of the Pullman car from which he and his bride have just departed. He sees in its sea-green velvet, its glass and its gleaming surfaces of silver, brass and darkly brilliant wood "all the glory of marriage, the environment of [his]

new estate," and it is this vision, when conveyed to Scratchy, which defeats the badman.

But here we have a double reversal. Because for all of Scratchy's simplemindedness, his moment of defeat is also one of perception; he has learned where he is. While in his moment of unarmed triumph the marshal is even more unarmed than he knows, for he is unaware that his new estate has its own complications—even though he has already been subjected to them. In the actual Pullman car the Negro porter has played with him and his bride much as the gunman has played with the town (and as Crane plays with the reader's susceptibilities), and they have been bullied with skill in ways that did not make it exactly plain to them that they were bullied. He [the porter] subtly used all the manners of the most unconquerable kinds of snobbery. He oppressed them; but of his oppression they had small knowledge, and they speedily forgot that infrequently a number of travelers covered them with stares of derisive enjoyment.

And again, in the dining car the waiter's patronage had been so entwined with deference that when they returned to their coach their faces revealed "a sense of escape."

"Historically," we are told, "there was supposed to be something in nitely humorous in their situation …" And there is indeed something humorous in their situation which is limited neither to

the circumstances of their middle-aged wedlock nor to their provincial discomfort in the Pullman car; there is the humor arising from their *historical* situation. For in face of the complexities of American civilization represented by the bullying yet patronizing Negro servants, the marshal is no less a "child of the earlier plains"

than Scratchy Wilson. The Stephen Crane who wrote "The Bride"

was essentially the same moral man who wrote the social protest of *Maggie*, only he has learned to hide his perceptions behind a sardonic smile. Still, the form of the story is at one with its meaning: the necessity for vigilance in confronting historical change is unending, and living with American

change is much like Crane's description of keeping a small boat a oat in an angry sea, where

"after successfully surmounting one wave you discover that there is another behind it just as important and just as nervously anxious to do something e ective in the way of swamping boats." A similar vigilance is required when reading his ction.

Perhaps at the root of our American fascination with the humorous story lies the awareness that if we don't know *where* we are, we have little chance of knowing *who* we are, that if we confuse the *time* we confuse the *place;* and that when we confuse these we endanger our humanity, both physically and morally. "Any room,"

writes Crane in "The Blue Hotel," "can present a tragic front; any room be comic." Thus men determine their own social weather, and human fate is a creation of human confusion.

The background of "The Blue Hotel" is that same confusion of time and place underlying "The Bride," and the Swede's failure to understand the rapidity of American historical change and its e ect upon social relationships and personality is his undoing. Frightened and believing himself to be in a West that has long since passed, he evokes the violence which he associates with it out of the very intensity of his illusion. Arriving at a place where he believes he is to be killed, he forces a ght from men who are usually peaceful, wins it, then goes, full of his victory, to a peaceful barroom and there, confused perhaps by his ten years of hiding the reality of the human form (he is a tailor), as well as by drinking, he picks on the man who appears least likely to defend himself and is killed. No

other Crane ction—except, perhaps, "The Monster"—expresses such a violence of disgust with man and his condition, and one feels behind the noncommittal mask of the prose a conviction that man exists in the universe ever at the mercy of a capricious fate, a hostile nature, an indi erent and unjust god— *and* his own misconceptions.

And yet, for all the self-destructive actions of the Swede, the Easterner sees his death as the corporate sin of society. Society is responsible to itself *for*

itself; the death is thus a failure of social charity. It is the same failure of social charity which characterizes

“The Monster.” Here Crane presents the cost of two acts of human loyalty and courage when they occur in a small, smug Northern town. Henry Johnson’s self-sacri cial act, which destroys his face and his mind, is repaid rst with applause and then with demands for his death or banishment. Dr. Trescott’s loyalty to his oath as physician and to the man who has saved his son’s life costs him his practice, his friends and ultimately his social identity. In short, “The Monster” places us in an atmosphere like that of post-Civil War America, and there is no question as to the Negro’s part in it, nor to the fact that the issues go much deeper than the question of race.

Indeed, the work is so fresh that the daily papers tell us all we need to know of its background and the timeliness of its implications.

As for Crane, the conscious artist, “The Monster” reminds us that he not only anticipated many of the techniques and themes of Hemingway, but that he also stands as the link between the Twain of *Pudd’nhead Wilson* and *Huckleberry Finn* and the Faulkner of *The Sound and the Fury*. The point is not simply that in *The Sound and the Fury*, as in Crane’s work, a young boy is warned against

“projecking” with owers, or that Benjy is as much a “monster” as Henry Johnson, or Henry as much an idiot as Benjy, or that their communities are more monstrous than either, or that to touch either is considered a test of courage by the small fry, or even that both su er when young white girls are frightened by them. The important point is that between Twain and the emergence of the driving honesty and social responsibility of Faulkner, no artist of Crane’s caliber looked so steadily at the wholeness of American life and discovered such far-reaching symbolic equivalents for its

unceasing state of civil war. Crane’s work remains fresh today because he was a great artist, but perhaps he became a great artist because under conditions of pressure and panic he stuck to his guns.

Introduction to *The Red Badge of Courage*, 1960.

Richard Wright’s Blues

If anybody ask you

who sing this song,

Say it was ole [Black Boy]

done been here and gone. *

As a writer, Richard Wright has outlined for himself a dual role: to discover and depict the meaning of Negro experience, and to reveal to both Negroes and whites those problems of a psychological and emotional nature which arise between them when they strive for mutual understanding.

Now, in *Black Boy*, he has used his own life to probe what qualities of will, imagination and intellect are required of a Southern Negro in order to possess the meaning of his life in the United States. Wright is an important writer, perhaps the most articulate Negro American, and what he has to say is highly perceptive. Imagine Bigger Thomas projecting his own life in lucid prose guided, say, by the insights of Marx and Freud, and you have an idea of this autobiography.

Published at a time when any sharply critical approach to Negro life has been dropped as a wartime expendable, it should do much to rede ne the problem of the Negro and American democracy. Its power can be observed in the shrill manner with which some professional “friends of the Negro people” have attempted to strangle the work in a noose of newsprint.

What in the tradition of literary autobiography is it like, this work described as a “great American autobiography”? As a nonwhite intellectual’s statement of his relationship to Western culture, *Black Boy* recalls the con icting pattern of identi cation and rejection found in Nehru’s *Toward Freedom*. In its use of ctional techniques,

its concern with criminality (sin) and the artistic sensibility, and in its author’s judgment and rejection of the narrow world of his origin, it recalls Joyce’s rejection of Dublin in *A Portrait of the Artist*.

And as a psychological document of life under oppressive conditions, it recalls *The House of the Dead*, Dostoevsky's profound study of the humanity of Russian criminals.

Such works were perhaps Wright's literary guides, aiding him to endow his life's incidents with communicable signi cance, providing him with ways of seeing, feeling and describing his environment. These in uences, however, were encountered only after these rst years of Wright's life were past, and were not part of the immediate folk culture into which he was born. In that culture the speci c folk-art form which helped shape the writer's attitude toward his life and which embodied the impulse that contributes much to the quality and tone of his autobiography was the Negro blues.

This would bear a word of explanation. The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to nger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. And certainly Wright's early childhood was crammed with catastrophic incidents. In a few short years his father deserted his mother, he knew intense hunger, he became a drunkard begging drinks from black stevedores in Memphis saloons; he had to ee Arkansas, where an uncle was lynched; he was forced to live with a fanatically religious grandmother in an atmosphere of constant bickering; he was lodged in an orphan asylum; he observed the su ering of his mother, who became a permanent invalid, while ghting o the blows of the poverty-stricken relatives with whom he had to live; he was cheated, beaten and kicked o jobs by white employees who disliked his eagerness to learn a trade; and to these objective circumstances must be added the subjective fact that Wright, with his sensitivity, extreme shyness and intelligence, was a problem child who rejected his family and was by them rejected.

Thus, along with the themes, equivalent descriptions of milieu and the perspectives to be found in Joyce, Nehru, Dostoevsky, George Moore and Rousseau, *Black Boy* is lled with blues-tempered echoes of railroad trains, the names of Southern towns and cities, estrangements, ghts and ights, deaths and disappointments, charged with physical and spiritual hungers

and pain. And like a blues sung by such an artist as Bessie Smith, its lyrical prose evokes the paradoxical, almost surreal image of a black boy singing lustily as he probes his own grievous wound.

In *Black Boy* two worlds have fused, two cultures merged, two impulses of Western man become coalesced. By discussing some of its cultural sources I hope to answer those critics who would make of the book a miracle and of its author a mystery. And while making no attempt to probe the mystery of the artist (who Hemingway says is “forged in injustice as a sword is forged”), I do hold that basically the prerequisites to the writing of *Black Boy* were, on the one hand, the microscopic degree of cultural freedom which Wright found in the South’s stony injustice, and, on the other, the existence of a personality agitated to a state of almost manic restlessness. There were, of course, other factors, chie y ideological, but these came later.

Wright speaks of his journey north as

…taking a part of the South to transplant in alien soil, to see if it could grow di erently, if it could drink of new and cool rains, bend in strange winds, respond to the warmth of other suns, and perhaps, to bloom.…

And just as Wright, the man, represents the blooming of the delinquent child of the autobiography, just so does *Black Boy* represent the owering—cross-fertilized by pollen blown by the winds of strange cultures—of the humble blues lyric. There is, as in all acts of creation, a world of mystery in this, but there is also enough that is comprehensible for Americans to create the social atmosphere in which other black boys might freely bloom.

For certainly in the historical sense Wright is no exception. Born on a Mississippi plantation, he was subjected to all those blasting

pressures which in a scant eighty years have sent the Negro people hurtling, without clearly de ned trajectory, from slavery to emancipation, from log cabin to city tenement, from the white folks’

elds and kitchens to factory assembly lines, and which, between two wars, have shattered the wholeness of its folk consciousness into a thousand writhing pieces.

Black Boy describes this process in the personal terms of *one* Negro childhood. Nevertheless, several critics have complained that it does not "explain" Richard Wright. Which, aside from the notion of art involved, serves to remind us that the prevailing mood of American criticism has so thoroughly excluded the Negro that it fails to recognize some of the most basic tenets of Western democratic thought when encountering them in a black skin. They forget that human life possesses an innate dignity and mankind an innate sense of nobility; that all men possess the tendency to dream and the compulsion to make their dreams reality; that the need to be ever dissatis ed and the urge ever to seek satisfaction is implicit in the human organism; and that all men are the victims and the bene ciaries of the goading, tormenting, commanding and informing activity of that imperious process known as the Mind—

the Mind, as Valéry describes it, "armed with its inexhaustible questions."

Perhaps all this (in which lies the very essence of the human, and which Wright takes for granted) has been forgotten because the critics recognize neither Negro humanity nor the full extent to which the Southern community renders the ful llment of human destiny impossible. And while it is true that *Black Boy* presents an almost unrelieved picture of a personality corrupted by brutal environment, it also presents those fresh, human responses brought to its world by the sensitive child:

There was the *wonder* I felt when I rst saw a brace of mountainlike, spotted, black-and-white horses clopping down a dusty road … the *delight* I caught in seeing long straight rows of red and green vegetables stretching away in the sun

… the faint, cool kiss of *sensuality* when dew came on to my cheeks … the vague *sense of the in nite* as I looked down upon the yellow, dreaming waters of

the Mississippi … the echoes of *nostalgia* I heard in the crying strings of wild geese … the *love* I had for the mute regality of tall, moss-clad oaks … the hint of *cosmic cruelty* that *I felt* when I saw the curved timbers of a wooden shack that had been warped in the summer sun … and there was

the *quiet terror* that su used my senses when vast hazes of gold washed earthward from star-heavy skies on silent nights.… [italics mine]

And a bit later, his reactions to religion:

Many of the religious symbols appealed to my sensibilities and I responded to the dramatic vision of life held by the church, feeling that to live day by day with death as one's sole thought was to be so compassionately sensitive toward all life as to view all men as slowly dying, and the trembling sense of fate that welled up, sweet and melancholy, from the hymns blended with the sense of fate that I had already caught from life.

There was also the in uence of his mother—so closely linked to his hysteria and sense of su ering—who (though he only implies it here) taught him, in the words of the dedication prefacing *Native Son*, "to revere the fanciful and the imaginative." There were also those white men—the one who allowed Wright to use his library privileges and the other who advised him to leave the South, and still others whose o ers of friendship he was too frightened to accept.

Wright assumed that the nucleus of plastic sensibility is a human heritage: the right and the opportunity to dilate, deepen and enrich sensibility—democracy. Thus the drama of *Black Boy* lies in its depiction of what occurs when Negro sensibility attempts to ful ll itself in the undemocratic South. Here it is not the individual that is the immediate focus, as in Joyce's *Stephen Hero*, but that upon which his sensibility was nourished.

Those critics who complain that Wright has omitted the development of his own sensibility hold that the work thus fails as art. Others, because it presents too little of what they consider attractive in Negro life, charge that it distorts reality. Both groups miss a very obvious point: that whatever else the environment contained, it had as little chance of prevailing against the

overwhelming weight of the child's unpleasant experiences as Beethoven's quartets would have of destroying the stench of a Nazi prison.

We come, then, to the question of art. The function, the psychology, of artistic selectivity is to eliminate from an art form all those elements of

experience which contain no compelling signi cance. Life is as the sea, art a ship in which man conquers life's crushing formlessness, reducing it to a course, a series of swells, tides and wind currents inscribed on a chart. Though drawn from the world, "the organized signi cance of art," writes Malraux,

"is stronger than all the multiplicity of the world; … that signi cance alone enables man to conquer chaos and to master destiny."

Wright saw his destiny—that combination of forces before which man feels powerless—in terms of a quick and casual violence in icted upon him by both family and community. His response was likewise violent, and it has been his need to give that violence signi cance which has shaped his writings.

What were the ways by which other Negroes confronted their destiny?

In the South of Wright's childhood there were three general ways: they could accept the role created for them by the whites and perpetually resolve the resulting con icts through the hope and emotional cartharsis of Negro religion; they could repress their dislike of Jim Crow social relations while striving for a middle way of respectability, becoming—consciously or unconsciously—the accomplices of the whites in oppressing their brothers; or they could reject the situation, adopt a criminal attitude, and carry on an unceasing psychological scrimmage with the whites, which often ared forth into physical violence.

Wright's attitude was nearest the last. Yet in it there was an all-important qualitative di erence: it represented a groping for *individual* values, in a black community whose values were what the young Negro critic Edward Bland has de ned as "pre-individual."

And herein lay the setting for the extreme con ict set o , both

within his family and in the community, by Wright's assertion of individuality. The clash was sharpest on the psychological level, for, to quote Bland,

In the pre-individualistic thinking of the Negro the stress is on the group.

Instead of seeing in terms of the individual, the Negro sees in terms of “races,”

masses of peoples separated from other masses according to color. Hence, an act rarely bears intent against him as a Negro individual. He is singled out not as a person but as a specimen of an ostracized group. He knows that he never exists in his own right but only to the extent that others hope to make the race su er vicariously through him.

This pre-individual state is induced arti cially, like the regression to primitive states noted among cultured inmates of Nazi prisons.

The primary technique in its enforcement is to impress the Negro child with the omniscience and omnipotence of the whites to the point that whites appear as ahuman as Jehovah, and as relentless as a Mississippi ood. Socially it is e ected through an elaborate scheme of taboos supported by a ruthless physical violence, which strikes not only the o ender but the entire black community. To wander from the paths of behavior laid down for the group is to become the agent of communal disaster.

In such a society the development of individuality depends upon a series of accidents, which often arise, as in Wright’s case, from conditions within the Negro family. In Wright’s life there was the accident that as a small child he could not distinguish between his fair-skinned grandmother and the white women of the town, thus developing skepticism as to their special status. To this was linked the accident of his having no close contacts with whites until after the child’s normal formative period.

But these objective accidents not only link forward to these qualities of rebellion, criminality and intellectual questioning expressed in Wright’s work today. They also link backward into the shadow of infancy where environment and consciousness are so darkly intertwined as to require the skill of a psychoanalyst to de ne their point of juncture. Nevertheless, at the age of four,

Wright set the house a re and was beaten near to death by his frightened mother. This beating, followed soon by his father's desertion of the family, seems to be the initial psychological motivation of his quest for a new identi cation. While delirious from this beating, Wright was haunted "by huge wobbly white bags like the full udders of a cow, suspended from the ceiling above me

[and] I was gripped by the fear that they were going to fall and drench me with some horrible liquid …"

It was as though the mother's milk had turned acid, and with it the whole pattern of life that had produced the ignorance, cruelty and fear that had fused with mother love and exploded in the beating. It is signi cant that the bags were of the hostile color white, and the female symbol that of the cow, the most stupid (and, to the small child, the most frightening) of domestic animals. Here in dream symbolism is expressed an attitude worthy of an Orestes.

And the signi cance of the crisis is increased by virtue of the historical fact that the lower-class Negro family is matriarchal; the child turns not to the father to compensate if he feels mother-rejection, but to the grandmother, or to an aunt—and Wright rejected both of these. Such rejection leaves the child open to psychological insecurity, distrust and all of those hostile environmental forces from which the family functions to protect it.

One of the Southern Negro family's methods of protecting the child is the severe beating—a homeopathic dose of the violence generated by black and white relationships. Such beatings as Wright's were administered for the child's own good—a good which the child resisted, thus giving family relationships an undercurrent of fear and hostility, which di ers qualitatively from that found in patriarchal middle-class families, because here the severe beating is administered by the mother, leaving the child no parental sanctuary.

He must ever embrace violence along with maternal tenderness, or else reject in his helpless way the mother.

The division between the Negro parents of Wright's mother's generation, whose sensibilities were often bound by their proximity to the slave experience, and their children, who historically and through the rapidity of American change stand emotionally and

psychologically much farther away, is quite deep. Indeed, sometimes as deep as the cultural distance between Yeats's *Autobiographies* and a Bessie Smith blues. This is the historical background to those incidents of family strife in *Black Boy* which have caused reviewers to question Wright's judgment of Negro emotional relationships.

We have here a problem in the sociology of sensibility that is obscured by certain psychological attitudes brought to Negro life by whites. The rst is the attitude which compels whites to impute to Negroes sentiments, attitudes and insights which, as a group living under certain de nite social conditions, Negroes could not humanly possess. It is the identical mechanism which William Empson identi es in literature as "pastoral." It implies that since Negroes possess the richly human virtues credited to them, then their social position is advantageous and should not be bettered, and, continuing syllogistically, the white individual need feel no guilt over his participation in Negro oppression.

The second attitude leads whites to misjudge Negro passion, looking upon it as they do out of the turgidity of their own frustrated yearning for emotional warmth, their capacity for sensation having been constricted by the impersonal mechanized relationships typical of bourgeois society. The Negro is idealized into a symbol of sensation, of unhampered social and sexual relationships. And when *Black Boy* questions whites' illusion, they are thwarted much in the manner of the Occidental who, after observing the erotic character of a primitive dance, "shacks up"

with a native woman, only to discover that far from possessing the hair-trigger sexual responses of a Stork Club "babe," she is relatively phlegmatic.

The point is not that American Negroes are primitives, but that as a group their social situation does not provide for the type of emotional relationships attributed to them. For how could the South, recognized as a

major part of the backward third of the nation, nurture in the black, most brutalized section of its population, those forms of human relationships achievable only in the most highly developed areas of civilization?

Champions of this “Aren’t-Negroes-Wonderful?” school of thinking often bring Paul Robeson and Marian Anderson forward as examples of highly developed sensibility, but actually they are only its *promise*. Both received their development from an extensive personal contact with European culture, free from the in uences which shape Southern Negro personality. In the United States, Wright, who is the only Negro literary artist of equal caliber, had to wait years, and escape to another environment before discovering the moral and ideological equivalents of his childhood attitudes.

Man cannot express that which does not exist—either in the form of dreams, ideas or realities—in his environment. Neither his thoughts nor his feelings, his sensibility nor his intellect are xed, innate qualities. They are processes which arise out of the interpénétration of human instinct with environment, through the process called experience, each changing and being changed by the other. Negroes cannot possess many of the sentiments attributed to them because the same changes in environment which, through experience, enlarge man’s intellect (and thus his capacity for still greater change) also modify his feelings—which in turn increase his sensibility, i.e., his sensitivity to re nements of impression and subtleties of emotion. The extent of these changes depends upon the quality of political and cultural freedom in the environment.

Intelligence tests have measured the quick rise in intellect which takes place in Southern Negroes after moving north, but little attention has been paid to the mutations e ected in their sensibilities. However, the two go hand in hand. Intellectual complexity is accompanied by emotional complexity, re nement of thought, and re nement of feeling. The movement north a ects more than the Negro’s wage scale; it a ects his entire psychosomatic structure.

The rapidity of Negro intellectual growth in the North is due partially to objective factors present in the environment, to in uences of the industrial city and to a greater political freedom.

But there are also changes within the “inner world.” In the North energies are released and given *intellectual* channelization—energies which in most Negroes in the South have been forced to take either

a *physical* form or, as with potentially intellectual types like Wright, to be expressed as nervous tension, anxiety and hysteria. Which is nothing mysterious. The human organism responds to environmental stimuli by converting them into either physical and/or intellectual energy. And what is called hysteria is suppressed intellectual energy expressed physically.

The “physical” character of their expression makes for much of the di culty in understanding American Negroes. Negro music and dances are frenziedly erotic, Negro religious ceremonies violently ecstatic, Negro speech strongly rhythmical and weighted with image and gesture. But there is more in this sensuousness than the unrestraint and insensitivity found in primitive cultures; nor is it simply the relatively spontaneous and undi erentiated responses of a people living in close contact with the soil. For despite Jim Crow, Negro life does not exist in a vacuum, but in the seething vortex of those tensions generated by the most highly industrialized of Western nations. The welfare of the most humble black Mississippi sharecropper is a ected less by the ow of the seasons and the rhythm of natural events than by the uctuations of the stock market, even though, as Wright states of his father, the sharecropper’s memories, actions and emotions are shaped by his immediate contact with nature and the crude social relations of the South.

All of this makes the American Negro far di erent from the

“simple” specimen for which he is taken. And the “physical” quality o ered as evidence of his primitive simplicity is actually the form of his complexity. The American Negro is a Western type whose social condition creates a state which is almost the reverse of the cataleptic trance: instead of his consciousness being lucid to the reality around it while the body is rigid, here it is the body which is alert, reacting to pressures which the constricting forces of Jim Crow block o from the transforming, concept-creating activity of the brain. The “eroticism” of Negro expression springs from much the same con ict as that displayed in the violent gesturing of a

man who attempts to express a complicated concept with a limited vocabulary; thwarted ideational energy is converted into

unsatisfactory pantomime, and his words are burdened with meanings they cannot convey. Here lies the source of the basic ambiguity of *Native Son*, wherein in order to translate Bigger's complicated feelings into universal ideas, Wright had to force into Bigger's consciousness concepts and ideas which his intellect could not formulate. Between Wright's skill and knowledge and the potentials of Bigger's mute feelings lay a thousand years of conscious culture.

In the South the sensibilities of both blacks and whites are inhibited by the rigidly de ned environment. For the Negro there is relative safety as long as the impulse toward individuality is suppressed. (Lynchings have occurred because Negroes painted their homes.) And it is the task of the Negro family to adjust the child to the Southern milieu; through it the currents, tensions and impulses generated within the human organism by the ux and ow of events are given their distribution. This also gives the group its distinctive character, which, because of Negroes' suppressed minority position, is very much in the nature of an elaborate but limited defense mechanism. Its function is dual: to protect the Negro from whirling away from the undi erentiated mass of his people into the unknown, symbolized in its most abstract form by insanity, and most concretely by lynching; and to protect him from those unknown forces *within himself* which might urge him to reach out for that social and human equality which the white South says he cannot have. Rather than throw himself against the charged wires of his prison, he annihilates the impulses within him.

The pre-individualistic black community discourages individuality out of self-defense. Having learned through experience that the whole group is punished for the actions of the single member, it has worked out e cient techniques of behavior control. For in many Southern communities everyone knows everyone else and is vulnerable to his opinions. In some communities everyone is

"related," regardless of blood ties. The regard shown by the group for its members, its general communal character and its cohesion are often mentioned, for by comparison with the coldly impersonal

relationships of the urban industrial community, its relationships are personal and warm.

Black Boy, however, illustrates that this personal quality, shaped by outer violence and inner fear, is ambivalent. Personal warmth is accompanied by an equally personal coldness, kindliness by cruelty, regard by malice. And these opposites are as quickly set o against the member who gestures toward individuality as a lynch mob forms at the cry of rape. Negro leaders have often been exasperated by this phenomenon, and Booker T. Washington (who demanded far less of Negro humanity than Richard Wright) described the Negro community as a basket of crabs, wherein should one attempt to climb out, the others immediately pull him back.

The member who breaks away is apt to be more impressed by its negative than by its positive character. He becomes a stranger even to his relatives and he interprets gestures of protection as blows of oppression—from which there is no hiding place, because every area of Negro life is a ected. Even parental love is given a qualitative balance akin to "sadism," and the extent of beatings and psychological maimings meted out by Southern Negro parents rivals those described by the nineteenth-century Russian writers as characteristic of peasant life under the Czars. The horrible thing is that the cruelty is also an expression of concern, of love.

In discussing the inadequacies for democratic living typical of the education provided Negroes by the South, a Negro educator has coined the term *mis-education*. Within the ambit of the black family this takes the form of training the child away from curiosity and adventure, against reaching out for those activities lying beyond the borders of the black community. And when the child resists, the parent discourages him, rst with the formula, "That there's for white folks. Colored can't have it," and nally with a beating.

It is not, then, the family and communal violence described by *Black Boy* that is unusual, but that Wright *recognized* and made no peace with its essential cruelty—even when, like a babe freshly emerged from the womb, he could not discern where his own personality ended and it began. Ordinarily both parent and child are protected against this cruelty, seeing it as love and nding

subjective sanction for it in the spiritual authority of the Fifth Commandment, and on the secular level in the legal and extralegal structure of the Jim Crow system. The child who did not rebel, or who was unsuccessful in his rebellion, learned a masochistic submissiveness and a denial of the impulse toward Western culture when it stirred within him.

Why then have Southern whites, who claim to "know" the Negro, missed all this? Simply because they, too, are armored against the horror and the cruelty. Either they deny the Negro's humanity and feel no cause to measure his actions against civilized norms; or they protect themselves from their guilt in the Negro's condition—and from their fear that their cooks might poison them, or that their nursemaids might strangle their infant charges, or that their eld hands might do them violence—by attributing to them a superhuman capacity for love, kindliness and forgiveness. Nor does this in any way contradict their stereotyped conviction that all Negroes (meaning those with whom they have no contact) are given to the most animal behavior.

It is only when the individual, whether white or black, *rejects* the pattern that he awakens to the nightmare of his life. Perhaps much of the South's regressive character springs from the fact that many, jarred by some casual crisis into wakefulness, ee hysterically into the sleep of violence or the coma of apathy again. For the penalty of wakefulness is to encounter ever more violence and horror than the sensibilities can sustain unless translated into some form of social action. Perhaps the impassioned character so noticeable among those white Southern liberals so active in the Negro's cause is due to their sense of accumulated horror; their passion, like the violence in Faulkner's novels, is evidence of a profound spiritual vomiting.

This compulsion is even more active in Wright and the increasing number of Negroes who have said an irrevocable "no" to the Southern pattern. Wright learned that it is not enough merely to reject the white South, but that he had also to reject that part of the South which lay within him. As a rebel he formulated that rejection negatively, because it was the negative face of the Negro community

upon which he looked most often as a child. It is this he is contemplating when he writes:

Whenever I thought of the essential bleakness of black life in America, I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the fall spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it. And when I brooded upon the cultural barrenness of black life, I wondered if clean, positive tenderness, love, honor, loyalty and the capacity to remember were native to man. I asked myself if these human qualities were not fostered, won, struggled and su ered for, preserved in ritual from one generation to another.

But far from implying that Negroes have no capacity for culture, as one critic interprets it, this is the strongest a rmation that they have. Wright is pointing out what should be obvious (especially to his Marxist critics): that Negro sensibility is socially and historically conditioned; that Western culture must be won, confronted like the animal in a Spanish bull ght, dominated by the red shawl of codi ed experience and brought heaving to its knees.

Wright knows perfectly well that Negro life is a byproduct of Western civilization, and that in it, if only one possesses the humanity and humility to see, are to be discovered all those impulses, tendencies, life and cultural forms to be found elsewhere in Western society.

The problem arises because the special condition of Negroes in the United States, including the defensive character of Negro life itself (the “will toward organization” noted in the Western capitalist appears in the Negro as a will to camou age, to dissimulate), so distorts these forms as to render their recognition as di cult as nding a wounded quail against the brown and yellow leaves of a Mississippi thicket; even the spilled blood blends with the background. Having himself been in the position of the quail—to expand the metaphor—Wright’s wounds have told him both the question and the answer which every successful hunter must discover for himself: “Where would I hide if *I* were a wounded quail?” But perhaps that requires more sympathy with one’s quarry than most hunters possess. Certainly it requires such a sensitivity to

the shifting guises of humanity under pressure as to allow them to identify themselves with the human content, whatever its outer form, and even with

those Southern Negroes to whom Paul Robeson's name is only a rolling sound in the fear-charged air.

Let us close with one nal word about the blues: their attraction lies in this, that they at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit. They fall short of tragedy only in that they provide no solution, o er no scapegoat but the self. Nowhere in America today is there social or political action based upon the solid realities of Negro life depicted in *Black Boy;* perhaps that is why, with its refusal to o er solutions, it is like the blues. Yet in it thousands of Negroes will for the rst time see their destiny in public print. Freed here of fear and the threat of violence, their lives have at last been organized, scaled down to possessable proportions. And in this lies Wright's most important achievement: he has converted the American Negro impulse toward self-annihilation and "going-under-ground" into a will to confront the world, to evaluate his experience honestly and throw his ndings unashamedly into the guilty conscience of America.

*Signature formula used by blues singers at conclusion of song.

From *The Antioco Review,* Summer 1945.

Beating That Boy

DURING these post-military-phase-of-the-war days when a Negro is asked what occurs when he visits with white friends, he is likely to chuckle and drily reply, "Oh, we beat that boy," meaning to belabor in polite conversation what is commonly called the "Negro problem." Though Negroes laugh when the phrase is used, beneath its folksy surface there lies —like a booby trap in a music box of folk tunes—a disillusionment that only its attitude of detached participation saves from exploding into violent cynicism, its counterpart among those Negroes who know no whites as friends.

For the racial situation has become like an irrational sea in which Americans ounder like convoyed ships in a gale. The phrase rotates like a gyroscope of irony of which the Negro maintains a hazardous stability as the sea-tossed ship of his emotions whirls him willy-nilly along: lunging

him toward the shoals of bitter rejection (of the ideology that makes him the sole sacri ce of America's tragedy); now away toward the mine-strewn shores of hopelessness (that despite the war, democracy is still discussed on an infantile level and himself in pre-adult terms); now smashing him ush against waves of anger that threaten to burst his seams in revolt (that his condition is so outrageously agrant); now teetering him clear on a brief, calm, sunlit swell of self-amusement (that he must cling to the convoy though he doubts its direction); now knocking him erect, like a whale on its tail, before plunging again into the still dark night of the one lone "rational" thing, the pounding irrational sea.

This is a nightmarishly "absurd" situation, and perhaps no major problem a ecting the destiny of a nation has ever received such super cial discussion. As Bucklin Moon knew when he conceived *Primer for White Folks*, a great deal of the super ciality comes from the general ignorance prevailing in our society of the historical and social condition of the black tenth of the population. He might have

subtitled his anthology, *A Short Course on the American Negro for Those Who "Beat That Boy."*

Primer for White Folks comes as a result of the long ght which Negroes have made to make their story known, and the aroused e orts of liberal whites, many of them Southerners, to chart more accurately that heart-lashing sea of irrationality called the "Negro problem." The fair-minded but uninformed should read the book to learn how much they have been humiliated, insulted and injured by the Rankins and Bilbos who speak in their name to the world.

Primer for White Folks is something new in its genre. Unlike similar anthologies, it does not consist solely of Negro contributions, but of writings on the racial situation as seen by both white and Negro authors. The book, which presents such writers as Will W.

Alexander, Kay Boyle, Sterling Brown, Henrietta Buckmaster, Fanny Kemble, Langsten Hughes, Wendell Wilkie, Lillian Smith, Dorothy Parker, James T. Farrell and Richard Wright, divides into three major sections. The rst, "Heritage," covers slavery, the Civil War and the end of Reconstruction

in Negro disfranchisement, and presents unfamiliar information on Negro slave revolts and heroism; the second consists of short stories about the mores of our society and the relationships, “sometimes ludicrous, sometimes tragic, between Negroes and whites”; and the third, “Today and Tomorrow,” presents the thoughts of contemporary white and Negro writers on the “Negro question” and their recommendations for its solution. This section is especially valuable and will bear repeated reference as the tense period we have just entered unfolds. Here are the most democratically informed discussions of the racial situation to appear in print since Pearl Harbor.

But if you believe you have read many of these pieces before, then you’re mistaken; even if you *have*, you haven’t. For here, under Bucklin Moon’s creative editing, they have been placed in a fresh context of meaning where, like the subtle relationships of forms in a great painting, they ever reveal something new. Encountering some of them here, one wonders whether Moon’s conception was not superior to even the best images which he found to give it articulation. What an astounding book this could have been had

every piece been on a par with its conception! Since hardly any aspect of our culture escapes the blight of hypocrisy implicit in our social institutions, it is not surprising that many of the pieces mix appeal for fair play with double-talk; or that most are much too fearful of that absolute concept “democracy,” circling above it like planes being forced to earth in a fog. They seemed concerned most often with patching up the merry-go-round-that-broke-down than with the projection of that oh-so-urgently-needed new American humanism. Here, too, the boy comes in for a bit of a beating.

These negative criticisms of its parts do not, however, apply to the anthology as a whole. For the negative when piled up quantitatively often assumes a positive value; and certainly it is valuable to detect the cracks in the tones of our most Liberty Bell voices. Then, too, such studies inevitably reveal as much about the white American as about the American Negro—which lends them a value that is generally ignored. When viewed from a perspective which takes this circumstance into account, *Primer for White*

Folks will be prized for the oblique light it throws upon an aspect of American writing which was not its immediate concern.

One notices, for instance, that most of the ction presented here, with the exception of stories by Dorothy Parker, Kay Boyle, Erskine Caldwell and William March, is by writers who have appeared since the Depression, and that most of the widely read authors of the between-wars period are, with the exceptions of James T. Farrell and Richard Wright, conspicuously missing. We are reminded that from 1776 to 1876 there was a conception of democracy current in this country that allowed the writer to identify himself with the Negro, and that had such an anthology been conceivable during the nineteenth century, it could have included such writers as Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Mark Twain. For slavery (it was not termed a "Negro problem" then) was a vital issue in the American consciousness, symbolic of the condition of Man, and a valid aspect of the writer's reality. Only after the Emancipation and the return of the Southern ruling class to power in the counterrevolution of 1876, was the Negro issue pushed into the underground of the American conscience and ignored.

To ignore, however, is not to nullify, and the fact that so many of our important writers are missing from *Primer for White Folks* raises the question whether the existence of the race problem in our culture has not had an insidiously powerful e ect upon twentieth-century writing that has not been generally suspected. Perhaps here, too, lies a partial explanation of why we have come to regard certain faults of this writing as excellences.

But rst let me hasten to say that I do not mean to imply that whites had any obligation to write of Negroes, nor that in the depiction of the racial situation lies any blueprint for a supreme ction (if so, all Negro writers would rate with Tolstoy and Balzac, Shakespeare and Dostoevsky). Unfortunately, the connection between literature and society is seldom so naively direct. There is, nevertheless, an inescapable connection between the writer and the beliefs and attitudes current in his culture, and it is here exactly that the "Negro problem" begins to exert a powerful, uncalculated in uence.

For since 1876 the race issue has been like a stave driven into the American system of values, a stave so deeply imbedded in the American *ethos* as to

render America a nation of ethical schizophrenics. Believing truly in democracy on one side of their minds, they act on the other in violation of its most sacred principles; holding that all men are created equal, they treat thirteen million Americans as though they were not.

There are, as always, political and economic motives for this rending of values, but in terms of the ethical and psychological, what was opportunistically labeled the “Negro problem” is actually a guilt problem charged with pain. Just how painful might be judged from the ceaseless e ort expended to dull its throbbings with the anesthesia of legend, myth, hypnotic ritual and narcotic modes of thinking. And not only have our popular culture, our newspapers, radio and cinema been devoted to justifying the Negro’s condition and the con ict created thereby, but even our social sciences and serious literature have been conscripted—all in the e ort to drown out the persistent voice of outraged conscience.

This unwillingness to resolve the con ict in keeping with his democratic ideals has compelled the white American, guratively, to force the Negro down into the deeper level of his consciousness, into the inner world, where reason and madness mingle with hope and memory and endlessly give birth to nightmare and to dream; down into the province of the psychiatrist and the artist, from whence spring the lunatic’s fancy and the work of art. It is a dangerous region even for the artist, and his tragedy lies in the fact that in order to tap the uid re of inspiration, he must perpetually descend and re-encounter not only the ghosts of his former selves, but all of the unconquered anguish of his living.

Obviously this position need not be absolutely disadvantageous for the Negro. It might, in a di erent culture, be highly strategic, enlisting in his cause the freedom-creating powers of art. For imprisoned in the deepest drives in human society, it is practically impossible for the white American to think of sex, of economics, his children or womenfolk, or of sweeping sociopolitical changes, without summoning into consciousness fear-ecked images of black men. Indeed, it seems that the Negro has become identi ed with those unpleasant aspects of conscience and consciousness which it is part of the American’s character to avoid. Thus, when the literary artist attempts to tap the charged springs issuing from his inner world, up oat his

misshapen and bloated images of the Negro, like the fetid bodies of the drowned, and he turns away, discarding an ambiguous substance which the artists of other cultures would confront boldly and humanize into the stu of a tragic art. It is as though we were to discard the bene cial properties of the x-ray simply because when used without the protection of a leaden screen it might burn us or produce sterility.

Indeed, the racial situation has exerted an in uence upon the writer similar to that of an x-ray concealed in a radio. Moving about, perhaps ignoring, perhaps enjoying Jack Benny and Rochester or a hot jazz band, he is unaware of his exposure to a force that shrivels his vital sperm. Not that it has rendered him completely sterile, but that it has caused him to produce deformed

progeny—literary o spring without hearts, without brains, viscera or vision, and some even without genitalia.

Thus it has not been its failure to depict racial matters that has determined the quality of American writing, but that the writer has formed the habit of living and thinking in a culture that is opposed to the deep thought and feeling necessary to profound art; hence its avoidance of emotion, its fear of ideas, its obsession with mere physical violence and pain, its overemphasis of understatement, its precise and complex verbal constructions for converting goatsong into carefully modulated squeaks.

Nor are the stories and articles included in *Primer for White Folks* free of these faults. But if they bear the mark of the culture out of which they spring, they are also appeals for a superior society and a more vital literature. As arranged here, they o er a vivid statement of the strengths and weaknesses of the new mood born in the hearts of Americans during the war, a mood more precise in its fears (of racial bloodshed) than de nite in its hopes (symbolized most concretely in the frantic e orts of interracial organizations and mayors' committees to discover a foolproof technique of riot control). But more signi cant than their obvious fears and vacillations, they are valuable for something practically missing from American writing since *Huckleberry Finn:* a search for images of black and white fraternity.

From *The New Republic,* October 22, 1945.

Brave Words for a Startling Occasion FIRST, as I express my gratitude for this honor which you have bestowed on me, let me say that I take it that you are rewarding my e orts rather than my not quite fully achieved attempt at a major novel. Indeed, if I were asked in all seriousness just what I considered to be the chief signi cance of *Invisible Man* as a ction, I would reply: its experimental attitude, and its attempt to return to the mood of personal moral responsibility for democracy which typi ed the best of our nineteenth-century ction. That my rst novel should win this most coveted prize must certainly indicate that there is a crisis in the American novel. You as critics have told us so, and current ction sales would indicate that the reading public agrees. Certainly the younger novelists concur. The explosive nature of events mocks our brightest e orts. And the very "facts"

which the naturalists assumed would make us free have lost the power to protect us from despair. Controversy now rages over just what aspects of American experience are suitable for novelistic treatment. The prestige of the theorists of the so-called novel of manners has been challenged. Thus, after a long period of stability we nd our assumptions concerning the novel being called into question. And though I was only vaguely aware of it, it was this growing crisis which shaped the writing of *Invisible Man*.

After the usual apprenticeship of imitation and seeking with delight to examine my experience through the discipline of the novel, I became gradually aware that the forms of so many of the works which impressed me were too restricted to contain the experience which I knew. The diversity of American life with its extreme uidity and openness seemed too vital and alive to be caught for more than the briefest instant in the tight, well-made Jamesian novel, which was, for all its artistic perfection, too concerned with "good taste" and stable areas. Nor could I safely use

the forms of the "hard-boiled" novel, with its dedication to physical violence, social cynicism and understatement. Understatement depends, after all, upon commonly held assumptions, and my minority status rendered all such assumptions questionable. There was also a problem of language, and even dialogue, which, with its hard-boiled stance and its monosyllabic utterance, is one of the shining achievements of twentieth-century American writing. For despite the notion that its rhythms were

those of everyday speech, I found that when compared with the rich babel of idiomatic expression around me, a language full of imagery and gesture and rhetorical canniness, it was embarrassingly austere. Our speech I found resounding with an alive language swirling with over three hundred years of American living, a mixture of the folk, the Biblical, the scienti c and the political. Slangy in one stance, academic in another, loaded poetically with imagery at one moment, mathematically bare of imagery in the next. As for the rather rigid concepts of reality which informed a number of the works which impressed me and to which I owe a great deal, I was forced to conclude that reality was far more mysterious and uncertain, and more exciting, and still, despite its raw violence and capriciousness, more promising. To attempt to express that American experience which has carried one back and forth and up and down the land and across, and across again the great river, from freight train to Pullman car, from contact with slavery to contact with a world of advanced scholarship, art and science, is simply to burst such neatly understated forms of the novel asunder.

A novel whose range was both broader and deeper was needed.

And in my search I found myself turning to our classical nineteenth-century novelists. I felt that except for the work of William Faulkner something vital had gone out of American prose after Mark Twain. I came to believe that the writers of that period took a much greater responsibility for the condition of democracy and, indeed, their works were imaginative projections of the con icts within the human heart which arose when the sacred principles of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights clashed with the practical exigencies of human greed and fear, hate and love. Naturally I was

attracted to these writers as a Negro. Whatever they thought of my people per se, in their imaginative economy the Negro symbolized both the man lowest down and the mysterious, underground aspect of human personality. In a sense the Negro was the gauge of the human condition as it waxed and waned in our democracy. These writers were willing to confront the broad complexities of American life, and we are the richer for their having done so.

Thus to see America with an awareness of its rich diversity and its almost magical uidity and freedom, I was forced to conceive of a novel unburdened

by the narrow naturalism which has led, after so many triumphs, to the nal and unrelieved despair which marks so much of our current ction. I was to dream of a prose which was exible, and swift as American change is swift, confronting the inequalities and brutalities of our society forthrightly, yet thrusting forth its images of hope, human fraternity and individual self-realization. It would use the richness of our speech, the idiomatic expression and the rhetorical ourishes from past periods which are still alive among us. And despite my personal failures, there must be possible a ction which, leaving sociology to the scientists, can arrive at the truth about the human condition, here and now, with all the bright magic of a fairy tale.

What has been missing from so much experimental writing has been the passionate will to dominate reality as well as the laws of art. This will is the true source of the experimental attitude. We who struggle with form and with America should remember Eidothea's advice to Menelaus when in the *Odyssey* he and his friends are seeking their way home. She tells him to seize her father, Proteus, and to hold him fast "however he may struggle and ght. He will turn into all sorts of shapes to try you," she says, "into all the creatures that live and move upon the earth, into water, into blazing re; but you must hold him fast and press him all the harder. When he is himself, and questions you in the same shape that he was when you saw him in his bed, let the old man go; and then, sir, ask which god it is who is angry, and how you shall make your way homewards over the sh-giving sea."

For the novelist, Proteus stands for both America and the inheritance of illusion through which all men must ght to achieve reality; the o ended god stands for our sins against those principles we all hold sacred. The way home we seek is that condition of man's being at home in the world, which is called love, and which we term democracy. Our task then is always to challenge the apparent forms of reality—that is, the xed manners and values of the few—

and to struggle with it until it reveals its mad, vari-implicated chaos, its false faces, and on until it surrenders its insight, its truth. We are fortunate as American writers in that with our variety of racial and national traditions, idioms and manners, we are yet one. On its profoundest level American experience is of a whole. Its truth lies in its diversity and swiftness of

change. Through forging forms of the novel worthy of it, we achieve not only the promise of our lives, but we anticipate the resolution of those world problems of humanity which for a moment seem to those who are in awe of statistics completely insoluble.

Whenever we as Americans have faced serious crises we have returned to fundamentals; this, in brief, is what I have tried to do.

Address for Presentation Ceremony, National Book Award, January 27, 1953.

The World and the Jug

"The World and the Jug" is actually a combination of two separate pieces. The rst, bearing the original title, was written at the suggestion of Myron Kolatch of The New Leader, *who was interested in my reactions, via telephone, to an essay by Irving Howe titled "Black Boys and Native Sons," which appeared in the Autumn 1963 issue of Howe's magazine,* Dissent.

Usually such a reply would have appeared in the same magazine in which the original essay was published, but in this instance, and since it hadn't occurred to me to commit my reactions to paper, they went to the editor who asked for them. The second section of the essay, originally entitled, "A Rejoinder," was written after Irving Howe had consented to reply, in The New Leader, *of February 3, 1964, to my attack. There is, unfortunately, too little space here to do justice to Howe's arguments, and it is recommended that the interested reader consult Mr. Howe's book of essays,* A World More Attractive*— a book worthy of his attention far beyond the limits of our exchange—published by Horizon Press in 1963.*

What runs counter to the revolutionary convention is, in revolutionary histories, suppressed more imperiously than embarrassing episodes in private memoirs, and by the same obscure forces.…

—André Malraux

I

FIRST, three questions: Why is it so often true that when critics confront the American as *Negro* they suddenly drop their advanced critical armament and revert with an air of con dent superiority to quite primitive modes of analysis? Why is it that sociology-oriented

critics seem to rate literature so far below politics and ideology that they would rather kill a novel than modify their presumptions concerning a given reality which it seeks in its own terms to project? Finally, why is it that so many of those who would tell us the meaning of Negro life never bother to learn how varied it really is?These questions are aroused by “Black Boys and Native Sons,” an essay by Irving Howe, the well-known critic and editor of *Dissent*, in the Autumn 1963 issue of that magazine. It is a lively piece, written with something of the Olympian authority that characterized Hannah Arendt’s “Re ections on Little Rock” in the Winter 1959

Dissent (a dark foreshadowing of the Eichmann blowup). And in addition to a hero, Richard Wright, it has two villians, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, who are seen as “black boys”

masquerading as false, self-deceived “native sons.” Wright himself is given a diversity of roles (all conceived by Howe): he is not only the archetypal and true-blue black boy—the “honesty” of his famous autobiography established this for Howe—but the spiritual father of Ellison, Baldwin and all other Negroes of literary bent to come.

Further, in the platonic sense he is his own father and the cultural hero who freed Ellison and Baldwin to write more “modulated”

prose.

Howe admires Wright’s accomplishments, and is frankly annoyed by the more favorable evaluation currently placed upon the works of the younger men. His claims for *Native Son* are quite broad: The day [it] appeared, American culture was changed forever … it made impossible a repetition of the old lies … it brought into the open … the fear and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture.… A blow at the white man, the novel forced him to recognize himself as an oppressor. A blow at the black man, the novel forced him to recognize the cost of his submission.

Native Son assaulted the most cherished of American vanities: the hope that the accumulated injustices of the past would bring with it no lasting penalties, the fantasy that in his humiliation the Negro somehow retained a sexual potency …

that made it necessary to envy and still more to suppress him. Speaking from the black wrath of retribution, Wright insisted that history can be a punishment.

He told us the one thing even the most liberal whites preferred not to hear: that Negroes were far from patient or forgiving, that they were scarred by fear, that they hated every moment of their suppression even when seeming most acquiescent, and that often enough they hated *us*, the decent and cultivated white men who from complicity or neglect shared in the responsibility of their plight.…

There are also negative criticisms: that the book is “crude,”

“melodramatic” and marred by “claustrophobia” of vision, that its characters are “cartoons,” *etc.* But these defects Howe forgives because of the book’s “clenched militancy.” One wishes he had stopped there. For in his zeal to champion Wright, it is as though he felt it necessary to stage a modern version of the Biblical myth of Noah, Ham, Shem and Japheth (based originally, I’m told, on a castration ritual), with rst Baldwin and then Ellison acting out the impious role of Ham: Baldwin by calling attention to Noah—

Wright’s artistic nakedness in his famous essays, “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1949) and “Many Thousands Gone” (1951); Ellison by rejecting “narrow naturalism” as a ctional method, and by alluding to the “diversity, uidity and magical freedom of American life” on that (for him at least) rather magical occasion when he was awarded the National Book Award. Ellison also o ends by having the narrator of *Invisible Man* speak of his life (Howe either missing the irony or assuming that *I* did) as one of “in nite possibilities”

while living in a hole in the ground.

Howe begins by attacking Baldwin's rejection in "Everybody's Protest Novel" of the type of literature he labeled "protest ction"

(Uncle Tom's Cabin and *Native Son* being prime examples), and which he considered incapable of dealing adequately with the complexity of Negro experience. Howe, noting that this was the beginning of Baldwin's career, sees the essay's underlying motive as a declaration of Baldwin's intention to transcend "the sterile categories of 'Negroness,' whether those enforced by the white world or those defensively erected by the Negroes themselves. No longer mere victim or rebel, the Negro would stand free in a self-achieved humanity. As Baldwin put it some years later, he hoped to

'prevent himself from becoming merely a Negro; or even, merely, a Negro writer.' " Baldwin's elected agency for self-achievement would be the novel —as it turns out, it was the essay *and* the novel—

but the novel, states Howe, "is an inherently ambiguous genre: it strains toward formal autonomy and can seldom avoid being public gesture."

I would have said that it is *always* a public gesture, though not necessarily a political one. I would also have pointed out that the American Negro novelist is himself "inherently ambiguous." As he strains toward self-achievement as artist (and here he can only

"integrate" and free himself), he moves toward ful lling his dual potentialities as Negro and American. While Howe agrees with Baldwin that "literature and sociology are not one and the same," he notes nevertheless that "it is equally true that such statements hardly begin to cope with the problem of how a writer's own experience a ects his desire to represent human a airs in a work of ction." Thus Baldwin's formula evades "through rhetorical sweep, the genuinely di cult issue of the relationship between social experience and literature." And to Baldwin's statement that one writes "out of one thing only—one's own experience" (I would have added, for the novelist, this quali cation: one's own experience as understood and ordered through one's knowledge of self, culture and literature), Howe, appearing suddenly in blackface, replies with a rhetorical sweep of his own:

What, then, was the experience of a man with a black skin, what *could* it be here in this country? How could a Negro put pen to paper, how could he so much as think or breathe, without some impulsion to protest, be it harsh or mild, political or private, released or buried? … The "sociology" of his existence forms a constant pressure on his literary work, and not merely in the way this might be true of any writer, but with a pain and ferocity that nothing could remove.

I must say that this brought a shock of recognition. Some twelve years ago, a friend argued with me for hours that I could not possibly write a novel because my experience as a Negro had been

too excruciating to allow me to achieve that psychological and emotional distance necessary to artistic creation. Since he "knew"

Negro experience better than I, I could not convince him that he might be wrong. Evidently Howe feels that unrelieved su ering is the only "real" Negro experience, and that the true Negro writer must be ferocious.

But there is also an American Negro tradition which teaches one to de ect racial provocation and to master and contain pain. It is a tradition which abhors as obscene any trading on one's own anguish for gain or sympathy; which springs not from a desire to deny the harshness of existence but from a will to deal with it as men at their best have always done. It takes fortitude to be a man, and no less to be an artist. Perhaps it takes even more if the black man would be an artist. If so, there are no exemptions. It would seem to me, therefore, that the question of how the "sociology of his existence"

presses upon a Negro writer's work depends upon how much of his life the individual writer is able to transform into art. What moves a writer to eloquence is less meaningful than what he makes of it.

How much, by the way, do we know of Sophocles' wounds?

One unfamiliar with what Howe stands for would get the impression that when he looks at a Negro he sees not a human being but an abstract embodiment of living hell. He seems never to have considered that American Negro life (and here he is encouraged by certain Negro

“spokesmen”) is, for the Negro who must live it, not only a burden (and not always that) but also a *discipline*—just as any human life which has endured so long is a discipline teaching its own insights into the human condition, its own strategies of survival. There is a fullness, even a richness here—and here *despite* the realities of politics, perhaps, but nevertheless here and real.

Because it is *human* life. And Wright, for all of his indictments, was no less its product than that other talented Mississippian, Leontyne Price. To deny in the interest of revolutionary posture that such possibilities of human richness exist for others, even in Mississippi, is not only to deny us our humanity but to betray the critic’s commitment to social reality. Critics who do so should abandon literature for politics.

For even as his life toughens the Negro, even as it brutalizes him, sensitizes him, dulls him, goads him to anger, moves him to irony, sometimes fracturing and sometimes a rming his hopes; even as it shapes his attitudes toward family, sex, love, religion; even as it modulates his humor, tempers his joy—it *conditions* him to deal with his life and with himself. Because it is *his* life and no mere abstraction in someone’s head. He must live it and try consciously to grasp its complexity until he can change it; must live it *as* he changes it. He is no mere product of his sociopolitical predicament.

He is a product of the interaction between his racial predicament, his individual will, and the broader American cultural freedom in which he nds his ambiguous existence. Thus he, too, in a limited way, is his own creation.

In his loyalty to Richard Wright, Howe considers Ellison and Baldwin guilty of lial betrayal because, in their own work, they have rejected the path laid down by *Native Son,* phonies because, while actually “black boys,” they pretend to be mere American writers trying to react to something of the pluralism of their predicament.

In his myth Howe takes the roles of both Shem and Japheth, trying mightily (his face turned backward so as not to see what it is he’s veiling) to cover the old man’s bare belly, and then becoming Wright’s voice from beyond the grave by uttering the curses which Wright was too ironic or too proud to have uttered himself, at least in print:

In response to Baldwin and Ellison, Wright would have said (I virtually quote the words he used in talking to me during the summer of 1958) that only through struggle could men with black skins, and for that matter, all the oppressed of the world, achieve their humility. It was a lesson, said Wright, with a touch of bitterness yet not without kindness, that the younger writers would have to learn in their own way and their own time. All that has happened since bears him out.

What, coming eighteen years after *Native Son* and thirteen years after World War II, does this rather limp cliché mean? Nor is it clear

what is meant by the last sentence—or is it that today Baldwin has come to out-Wrighting Richard? The real questions seem to be: How does the Negro writer participate *as a writer* in the struggle for human freedom? To whom does he address his work? What values emerging from Negro experience does he try to a rm?

I started with the primary assumption that men with black skins, having retained their humanity before all of the conscious e orts made to dehumanize them, especially following the Reconstruction, are unquestionably human. Thus they have the obligation of freeing themselves —whoever their allies might be—by depending upon the validity of their own experience for an accurate picture of the reality which they seek to change, and for a gauge of the values they would see made manifest. Crucial to this view is the belief that their resistance to provocation, their coolness under pressure, their sense of timing and their tenacious hold on the ideal of their ultimate freedom are indispensable values in the struggle, and are at least as characteristic of American Negroes as the hatred, fear and vindictiveness which Wright chose to emphasize.

Wright believed in the much abused idea that novels are

“weapons”—the counterpart of the dreary notion, common among most minority groups, that novels are instruments of good public relations. But I believe that true novels, even when most pessimistic and bitter, arise out of an impulse to celebrate human life and therefore are ritualistic and ceremonial at their core. Thus they would preserve as they destroy, a rm as they reject.

In *Native Son* Wright began with the ideological proposition that what whites think of the Negro's reality is more important than what Negroes themselves know it to be. Hence Bigger Thomas was presented as a near-subhuman indictment of white oppression. He was designed to shock whites out of their apathy and end the circumstances out of which Wright insisted Bigger emerged. Here environment is all—and interestingly enough, environment conceived solely in terms of the physical, the non-conscious. Well, cut o my legs and call me Shorty! Kill my parents and throw me on the mercy of the court as an orphan! Wright could imagine Bigger,

but Bigger could not possibly imagine Richard Wright. Wright saw to that.

But without arguing Wright's right to his personal vision, I would say that he was himself a better argument for my approach than Bigger was for his. And so, to be fair and as inclusive as Howe, is James Baldwin. Both are true Negro Americans, and both a rm the broad possibility of personal realization which I see as a saving aspect of American life. Surely, this much can be admitted without denying the injustice which all three of us have protested.

Howe is impressed by Wright's pioneering role and by the "…

enormous courage, the discipline of self-conquest required to conceive Bigger Thomas.…" And earlier: "If such younger novelists as Baldwin and Ralph Ellison were able to move beyond Wright's harsh naturalism toward more supple modes of ction, that was only possible because Wright had been there rst, courageous enough to release the full weight of his anger."

It is not for me to judge Wright's courage, but I must ask just why it was possible for me to write as I write "only" because Wright released his anger? Can't I be allowed to release my own? What does Howe know of my acquaintance with violence, or the shape of my courage or the intensity of my anger? I suggest that my credentials are at least as valid as Wright's, even though he began writing long before I did, and it is possible that I have lived through and committed even more violence than he. Howe must wait for an autobiography before he can be responsibly certain. Everybody wants to tell us what a Negro is, yet few wish, even in a joke, to be one. But if you

would tell me who I am, at least take the trouble to discover what I have been.

Which brings me to the most distressing aspect of Howe's thinking: his Northern white liberal version of the white Southern myth of absolute separation of the races. He implies that Negroes can only aspire to contest other Negroes (this at a time when Baldwin has been taking on just about everyone, including Hemingway, Faulkner and the United States Attorney General!), and must wait for the

appearance of a Black Hope before they have the courage to move.

Howe is so committed to a sociological vision of society that he apparently cannot see (perhaps because he is dealing with Negroes

—although not because he would suppress us socially or politically, for in fact he is anxious to end such suppression) that whatever the e ciency of segregation as a sociopolitical arrangement, it has been far from absolute on the level of *culture*. Southern whites cannot walk, talk, sing, conceive of laws or justice, think of sex, love, the family or freedom without responding to the presence of Negroes.

Similarly, no matter how strictly Negroes are segregated socially and politically, on the level of the imagination their ability to achieve freedom is limited only by their individual aspiration, insight, energy and will. Wright was able to free himself in Mississippi because he had the imagination and the will to do so. He was as much a product of his reading as of his painful experiences, and he made himself a writer by subjecting himself to the writer's discipline—as he understood it. The same is true of James Baldwin, who is not the product of a Negro store-front church but of the library, and the same is true of me.

Howe seems to see segregation as an opaque steel jug with the Negroes inside waiting for some black messiah to come along and blow the cork. Wright is his hero and he sticks with him loyally. B

ut if we are in a jug it is transparent, not opaque, and one is allowed not only to see outside but to read what is going on out there, and to make

identi cations as to values and human quality. So in Macon County, Alabama, I read Marx, Freud, T. S. Eliot, Pound, Gertrude Stein and Hemingway. Books which seldom, if ever, mentioned Negroes were to release me from whatever “segregated” idea I might have had of my human possibilities. I was freed not by propagandists or by the example of Wright (I did not know him at the time and was earnestly trying to learn enough to write a symphony and have it performed by the time I was twenty-six, because Wagner had done so and I admired his music), but by composers, novelists, and poets who spoke to me of more interesting and freer ways of life.

These were works which, by ful lling themselves as works of art, by being satis ed to deal with life in terms of their own sources of power, were able to give me a broader sense of life and possibility.

Indeed, I understand a bit more about myself as a Negro because literature has taught me something of my identity as a Western man, as a political being. It has also taught me something of the cost of being an individual who aspires to conscious eloquence. It requires real poverty of the imagination to think that this can come to a Negro *only* through the example of *other Negroes*, especially after the performance of the slaves in recreating themselves, in good part, out of the images and myths of the Old Testament Jews.

No, Wright was no spiritual father of mine, certainly in no sense I recognize —nor did he pretend to be, since he felt that I had started writing too late. It was Baldwin’s career, not mine, that Wright proudly advanced by helping him attain the Eugene Saxton Fellowship, and it was Baldwin who found Wright a lion in his path.

Being older and familiar with quite di erent lions in quite di erent paths, I simply stepped around him.

But Wright was a friend for whose magazine I wrote my rst book review and short story, and a personal hero in the same way Hot Lips Paige and Jimmy Rushing were friends and heroes. I felt no need to attack what I considered the limitations of his vision because I was quite impressed by what he had achieved. And in this, although I saw with the black vision of

Ham, I was, I suppose, as pious as Shem and Japheth. Still I would write my own books and they would be in themselves, implicitly, criticisms of Wright's; just as all novels of a given historical moment form an argument over the nature of reality and are, to an extent, criticisms each of the other.

While I rejected Bigger Thomas as any *nal* image of Negro personality, I recognized *Native Son* as an achievement, as one man's essay in de ning the human condition as seen from a speci c Negro perspective at a given time in a given place. And I was proud to have known Wright and happy for the impact he had made upon our apathy. But Howe's ideas notwithstanding, history is history, cultural contacts ever mysterious, and taste exasperatingly personal.

Two days after arriving in New York I was to read Malraux's *Man's Fate* and *The Days of Wrath*, and after these how could I be impressed by Wright as an ideological novelist? Need my skin blind me to all other values? Yet Howe writes:

When Negro liberals write that despite the prevalence of bias there has been an improvement in the life of their people, such statements are reasonable and necessary. But what have these to do with the way Negroes feel, with the power of the memories they must surely retain? About this we know very little and would be well advised not to nourish preconceptions, for their feelings may well be closer to Wright's rasping outbursts than to the more modulated tones of the younger Negro novelists. *Wright remembered*, and what he remembered other Negroes must also have remembered. And in that way he kept faith with the experience of the boy who had fought his way out of the depths, to speak for those who remained there.

Wright, for Howe, is the genuine article, the authentic Negro writer, and his tone the only authentic tone. But why strip Wright of his individuality in order to criticize other writers? He had his memories and I have mine, just as I suppose Irving Howe has his—

or has Marx spoken the nal word for him? Indeed, very early in *Black Boy*, Wright's memory and his contact with literature come together in a way revealing, at least to the eye concerned with Wright the literary man, that his manner of keeping faith with the Negroes who remained in the depths is

quite interesting: (After I had outlived the shocks of childhood, after the habit of re ection had been born in me, I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man and how shallow was even our despair. After I had learned other ways of life I used to brood upon the unconscious irony of those who felt that Negroes led so passional an existence! I saw that what had been taken for our emotional strength was our negative confusions, our ights, our fears, our frenzy under pressure.

(Whenever I thought of the essential bleakness of black life in America, I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it. And when I brooded upon the cultural barrenness of black life, I wondered if clean, positive tenderness, love, honor, loyalty and the capacity to remember were native with man. I asked myself if these human qualities were not fostered, won, struggled and su ered for, preserved in ritual from one generation to another.) Must I be condemned because my sense of Negro life was quite di erent? Or because for me keeping faith would never allow me to even raise such a question about any segment of humanity? *Black Boy* is not a sociological case history but an autobiography, and therefore a work of art shaped by a writer bent upon making an ideological point. Doubtless, this was the beginning of Wright's exile, the making of a decision which was to shape his life and writing thereafter. And it is precisely at this point that Wright is being what I would call, in Howe's words, "literary to a fault."

For just as *How Bigger Was Born* is Wright's Jamesian preface to *Native Son*, the passage quoted above is his paraphrase of Henry James's catalogue of those items of a high civilization which were absent from American life during Hawthorne's day, and which seemed so necessary in order for the novelist to function. This, then, was Wright's list of those items of high humanity which he found missing among Negroes. Thank God, I have never been quite that literary.

How awful that Wright found the facile answers of Marxism before he learned to use literature as a means for discovering the forms of American

Negro humanity. I could not and cannot question their existence; I can only seek again and again to project that humanity as I see it and feel it. To me Wright as *writer* was less interesting than the enigma he personi ed: that he could so dissociate himself from the complexity of his background while trying so hard to improve the condition of black men everywhere; that he could be so wonderful an example of human possibility but could not for ideological reasons depict a Negro as intelligent, as creative or as dedicated as himself.

In his e ort to resuscitate Wright, Irving Howe would designate the role which Negro writers are to play more rigidly than any Southern politician—and for the best of reasons. We must express

"black" anger and "clenched militancy"; most of all we should not become too interested in the problems of the art of literature, even though it is through these that we seek our individual identities.

And between writing well and being ideologically militant, we must choose militancy.

Well, it all sounds quite familiar, and I fear the social order which it forecasts more than I do that of Mississippi. Ironically, during the 1940s it was one of the main sources of Wright's rage and frustration.

II

I am sorry Irving Howe got the impression that I was throwing bean-balls when I only meant to pitch him a hyperbole. It would seem, however, that he approves of angry Negro writers only until one questions his ideas; then he reaches for his honor, cries

"misrepresentation" and "distortion," and charges the writer with being both out of control of himself and with fashioning a "strategy calculated to appeal, ready-made, to the preconceptions of the liberal audience." Howe implies that there are di erences between us which I disguised in my essay; yet whatever the validity of this attempt at long-distance psychoanalysis, it was not his honor which I questioned but his thinking, not his good faith but his critical method.

And the major di erences which these raised between us I tried to describe. They are to be seen by anyone who reads Howe's "Black Boys and Native Sons" not as a collection of thematically related fragments but as the literary exposition of a considered point of view. I tried to interpret this essay in the light of the impact it made upon my sense of life and literature, and I judged it through its total form—just as I would have Howe base his judgments of writers and their circumstances on as much of what we know about the actual

complexity of men living in a highly pluralistic society as is possible.

I realize that the *un* common sense of a critic, his special genius, is a gift to be thankful for whenever we nd it. The very least I expected of Howe, though, was that he would remember his *common* sense, that he would not be carried away by that intellectual abandon, that lack of restraint, which seizes those who regard blackness as an absolute, and who see in it a release from the complications of the real world.

Howe is interested in militant confrontation and su ering; yet evidently he recognizes neither when they involve some act of his own. He *really* did not know the subject was loaded. Very well, but I was brought into the booby-trapped eld of his assumptions, and nding myself in pain, I did not choose to "hold back from the su ering" in icted upon me there. Out of an old habit I yelled—

without seeking Howe's permission, it is true—where it hurt the most. For oddly enough, I found it far less painful to have to move to the back of a Southern bus, or climb to the peanut gallery of a movie house—matters about which I could do nothing except walk, read, hunt, dance, sculpt, cultivate ideas, or seek other uses for my time—than to tolerate concepts which distorted the actual reality of my situation or my reactions to it.

I could escape the reduction imposed by unjust laws and customs, but not that imposed by ideas which de ned me as no more than the *sum* of those laws and customs. I learned to outmaneuver those who interpreted my silence as submission, my e orts at self-control as fear, my contempt as awe before superior status, my dreams of faraway places and room at the top of the heap as defeat before the barriers of their sti ing, provincial world. And

my struggle became a desperate battle which was usually fought, though not always, in silence; a guerrilla action in a larger war in which I found some of the most treacherous assaults against me committed by those who regarded themselves either as neutrals, as sympathizers, or as disinterested military advisers.

I recall this not in complaint, for thus was I disciplined to endure the absurdities of both conscious and unconscious prejudice, to resist racial provocation and, before the ready violence of brutal

policemen, railroad “bulls,” and casual white citizens, to hold my peace and bide my time. Thus was I forced to evaluate my own self-worth, and the narrow freedom in which it existed, against the power of those who would destroy me. In time I was to leave the South, although it has never left me, and the interests which I discovered there became my life.

But having left the South I did not leave the battle—for how could I leave Howe? He is a man of words and ideas, and since I, too, nd my identity in the world of ideas and words, where would I ee? I still endure the nonsense of fools with a certain patience, but when a respected critic distorts my situation in order to feel comfortable in the abstractions he would impose upon American reality, then it is indeed “in accordance with my nature” to protest. Ideas are important in themselves, perhaps, but when they are interposed between me and my sense of reality I feel threatened; they are too elusive, they move with missile speed and are too often red from altitudes rising high above the cluttered terrain upon which I struggle. And too often those with a facility for ideas nd themselves in the councils of power representing me at the double distance of racial alienation and inexperience.

Taking leave of Howe for a moment—for his lapse is merely symptomatic —let me speak generally. Many of those who write of Negro life today seem to assume that as long as their hearts are in the right place they can be as arbitrary as they wish in their formulations. Others seem to feel that they can air with impunity their most private Freudian fantasies as long as they are given the slightest camou age of intellectuality and projected as “Negro.”

They have made of the no-man's land created by segregation a territory for infantile self-expression and intellectual anarchy. They write as though Negro life exists only in light of their belated regard, and they publish interpretations of Negro experience which would not hold true for their own or for any other form of human life.

Here the basic unity of human experience that assures us of some possibility of empathic and symbolic identi cation with those of other backgrounds is blasted in the interest of specious political and philosophical conceits. Prefabricated Negroes are sketched on sheets of paper and superimposed upon the Negro community; then when someone thrusts his head through the page and yells, "Watch out there, Jack, there're people living under here," they are shocked and indignant. I am afraid, however, that we shall hear much more of such protest as these interpositions continue. And I predict this not out of any easy gesture of militancy (and what an easy con-game for ambitious, publicity-hungry Negroes this stance of "militancy" has become!), but because as Negroes express increasingly their irritation in this critical area, many of those who make so lightly with our image shall nd their own subjected to a most devastating scrutiny.

One of the most insidious crimes occurring in this democracy is that of designating another, politically weaker, less socially acceptable, people as the receptacle for one's own self-disgust, for one's own infantile rebellions, for one's own fears of, and retreats from, reality. It is the crime of reducing the humanity of others to that of a mere convenience, a counter in a banal game which involves no apparent risk to ourselves. With us Negroes it started with the appropriation of our freedom and our labor; then it was our music, our speech, our dance and the comic distortion of our image by burnt-corked, cotton-gloved cornballs yelling, "Mammy!"

And while it would be futile, non-tragic, and un-Negro American to complain over the processes through which we have become who and what we are, it is perhaps permissible to say that the time for such misappropriations ran out long ago.

For one thing, Negro American consciousness is not a product (as so often seems true of so many American groups) of a will to historical forgetfulness. It is a product of our memory, sustained and constantly

reinforced by events, by our watchful waiting, and by our hopeful suspension of nal judgment as to the meaning of our grievances. For another, most Negroes recognize themselves as themselves despite what others might believe them to be. Thus,

although the sociologists tell us that thousands of light-skinned Negroes become white each year undetected, most Negroes can spot a paper-thin "white Negro" every time simply because those who masquerade missed what others were forced to pick up along the way: discipline—a discipline which these heavy thinkers would not undergo even if guaranteed that combined with their own heritage it would make of them the freest of spirits, the wisest of men and the most sublime of heroes.

• • •

The rhetorical strategy of my original reply was not meant, as Howe interprets it, to strike the stance of a "free artist" against the

"ideological critic," although I *do* recognize that I can be free only to the extent that I detect error and grasp the complex reality of my circumstances and work to dominate it through the techniques which are my means of confronting the world. Perhaps I am only free enough to recognize those tendencies of thought which, actualized, would render me even less free.

Even so, I did not intend to take the stance of the "knowing Negro writer" against the "presuming white intellectual." While I am without doubt a Negro and a writer, I am also an *American* writer, and while I am more knowing than Howe where my own life and its in uences are concerned, I took the time to question his presumptions as one responsible for contributing as much as he is capable to the clear perception of American social reality. For to think unclearly about that segment of reality in which I nd my existence is to do myself violence. To allow others to go unchallenged when they distort that reality is to participate not only in that distortion but to accept, as in this instance, a violence in icted upon the art of criticism. And if I am to recognize those aspects of my role as writer which do not depend primarily upon my racial identity, if I am to ful ll the writer's basic responsibilities to his craft, then surely I must insist upon the

maintenance of a certain level of precision in language, a maximum correspondence between

the form of a piece of writing and its content, and between words and ideas and the things and processes of his world.

Whatever my role as “race man” (and it knocks me out whenever anyone, black or white, tries to tell me—and the white Southerners have no monopoly here—how to become their conception of a

“good Negro”), I am as writer no less a custodian of the American language than is Irving Howe. Indeed, to the extent that I am a writer—I lay no claims to being a thinker—the American language, including the Negro idiom, is all that I have. So let me emphasize that my reply to Howe was neither motivated by racial defensiveness nor addressed to his own racial identity.

It is fortunate that it was not, for considering how Howe identi es himself in this instance, I would have missed the target, which would have been embarrassing. Yet it would have been an innocent mistake, because in situations such as this many Negroes, like myself, make a positive distinction between “whites” and “Jews.”

Not to do so could be either o ensive, embarrassing, unjust or even dangerous. If I would know who I am and preserve who I am, then I must see others distinctly whether they see me so or not. Thus I feel uncomfortable whenever I discover Jewish intellectuals writing as though *they* were guilty of enslaving my grandparents, or as though *the Jews* were responsible for the system of segregation. Not only do they have enough troubles of their own, as the saying goes, but Negroes know this only too well.

The real guilt of such Jewish intellectuals lies in their facile, perhaps unconscious, but certainly unrealistic, identi cation with what is called the “power structure.” Negroes call that “passing for white.” Speaking personally, both as writer and as Negro American, I would like to see the more positive distinctions between whites and Jewish Americans maintained. Not only does it make for a necessary bit of historical and

social clarity, at least where Negroes are concerned, but I consider the United States freer politically and richer culturally because there are Jewish Americans to bring it the bene t of their special forms of dissent, their humor and their gift for ideas which are based upon the uniqueness of their experience.

The diversity of American life is often painful, frequently

burdensome and always a source of con ict, but in it lies our fate and our hope.

To Howe's charge that I found his exaggerated claims for Richard Wright's in uence upon my own work presumptuous, I plead guilty.

Was it necessary to impose a line of succession upon Negro writers simply because Howe identi ed with Wright's cause? And why, since he grasps so readily the intentional absurdity of my question regarding his relationship to Marx, couldn't he see that the notion of an intellectual or artistic succession based upon color or racial background is no less absurd than one based upon a common religious background? *(Of course, Irving, I know that you haven't believed in nal words for twenty years—not even your own—and I know, too, that the line from Marx to Howe is as complex and as dialectical as that from Wright to Ellison. My point was to try to see to it that certain laspes in your thinking did not become nal.)* In fact, this whole exchange would never have started had I not been dragged into the discussion. Still, if Howe could take on the role of man with a "black skin," why shouldn't I assume the role of critic-of-critic?

But how surprising are Howe's ideas concerning the ways of controversy. Why, unless of course he holds no respect for his opponent, should a polemicist be expected to make things *hard* for himself? As for the "preconceptions of the liberal audience," I had not considered them, actually, except as they appear in Howe's own thinking. Beyond this I wrote for anyone who might hesitate to question his formulations, especially very young Negro writers who might be bewildered by the incongruity of such ideas coming from such an authority. Howe himself rendered complicated rhetorical strategies unnecessary by lunging into questionable territory with his anks left so unprotected that any schoolboy sniper could have routed

him with a bird gun. Indeed, his reaction to my reply reminds me of an incident which occurred during the 1937

Recession when a companion and I were hunting in the country outside Dayton, Ohio.

There had been a heavy snowfall and we had just put up a covey of quail from a thicket which edged a eld when, through the rising whirr of the rocketing, snow-shattering birds, we saw, emerging

from a clump of trees across the eld, a large, red-faced, mackinawed farmer, who came running toward us shouting and brandishing a ri e. I could see strands of moisture tearing from his working mouth as he came on, running like a bear across the whiteness, the brown birds veering and scattering before him; and standing there against the snow, a white hill behind me and with no tree nor foxhole for cover I felt as exposed as a Black Muslim caught at a meeting of the K.K.K.

He had appeared as suddenly as the quail, and although the ri e was not yet to his shoulder, I was trans xed, watching him zooming up to become the largest, loudest, most aggressive-sounding white man I'd seen in my life, and I was, quite frankly, afraid. Then I was measuring his approach to the crunching tempo of his running and praying silently that he'd come within range of my shotgun before he red; that I would be able to do what seemed necessary for me to do; that, shooting from the hip with an old twelve-gauge shotgun, I could stop him before he could shoot either me or my companion; and that, though stopped e ectively, he would be neither killed nor blinded nor maimed.

It was a mixed-up prayer in an icy interval which ended in a smoking fury of cursing, when, at a warning from my companion, the farmer suddenly halted. Then we learned that this reckless man had meant only to warn us o of land which was not even his but that of a neighbor, my companion's foster father. He stood there between the two shotguns pointing short-ranged at his middle, his face quite drained of color now by the realization of how close to death he'd come, sputtering indignantly that we'd interpreted his ri e, which wasn't loaded, in a manner other than he'd

intended. He truly did not realize that situations can be more loaded than guns and gestures more eloquent than words.

Fortunately, words are not ri es, but perhaps Howe is just as innocent of the rhetorical eloquence of situations as the farmer. He does not see that the meaning which emerges from his essay is not determined by isolated statements, but by the juxtaposition of those statements in a context which creates a larger statement. Or that contributing to the judgment rendered by that larger statement is

the one in which it is uttered. When Howe pits Baldwin and Ellison against Wright and then gives Wright the better of the argument by using such emotionally weighted terms as “remembered” and “kept faith,” the implication to me is that Baldwin and Ellison did *not* remember or keep faith with those who remained behind. If this be true, then I think that in this instance “villain” is not too strong a term.

Howe is not the rst writer given to sociological categories who has had unconscious value judgments slip into his “analytical” or

“scienti c” descriptions. Thus I can believe that his approach was meant to be “analytic, not exhortatory; descriptive, not prescriptive.” The results, however, are something else again. And are we to believe that he simply does not recognize rhetoric when he practices it? That when he asks, “what *could* [his italics] the experience of a man with a black skin be …” etc., he thinks he is describing a situation as viewed by each and every Negro writer rather than expressing, yes, and in the mode of “exhortation,” the views of Irving Howe? Doesn’t he recognize that just as the anti-Negro stereotype is a command to Negroes to mold themselves in its image, there sounds through his descriptive “thus it is” the command “thus you become”? And doesn’t he realize that in this emotion-charged area de nitive description is, in e ect, prescription? If he does not, how then can we depend upon his

“analysis” of politics or his reading of ction?

Perhaps Howe could relax his views concerning the situation of the writers with a “black skin” if he examined some of the meanings which he gives to the word “Negro.” He contends that I “cannot help being caught up with *the*

idea of the Negro," but I have never said that I could or wished to do so—only Howe makes a problem for me here. When he uses the term "Negro" he speaks of it as a

"stigma," and again he speaks of "Negroness" as a "sterile category."

He sees the Negro writer as experiencing a "constant pressure upon his literary work" from the "sociology of his existence … not merely in the way this might be true of any writer, but with a *pain* and *ferocity* that nothing could remove." (Italics mine.)

Note that this is a condition arising from a *collective* experience which leaves no room for the individual writer's unique existence. It leaves no room for that intensity of personal anguish which compels the artist to seek relief by projecting it into the world in conjunction with other things; that anguish which might take the form of an acute sense of inferiority for one, homosexuality for another, an overwhelming sense of the absurdity of human life for still another.

Nor does it leave room for the experience that might be caused by humiliation, by a harelip, by a stutter, by epilepsy—indeed, by any and everything in this life which plunges the talented individual into solitude while leaving him the will to transcend his condition through art. The individual Negro writer must create out of his own special needs and through his own sensibilities, and by these alone.

Otherwise all those who su er in anonymity would be creators.

Howe makes of "Negroness" a metaphysical condition, one that is a state of irremediable agony which all but engulfs the mind.

Happily, the view from inside the skin is not so dark as it appears to be from Howe's remote position, and therefore my view of

"Negroness" is neither his nor that of the exponents of *négritude*. It is not skin color which makes a Negro American but cultural heritage as shaped by the American experience, the social and political predicament, a sharing of that "concord of sensibilities" which the group expresses through

historical circumstance and through which it has come to constitute a subdivision of the larger American culture. Being a Negro American has to do with the memory of slavery and the hope of emancipation and the betrayal by allies and the revenge and contempt in icted by our former masters after the Reconstruction, and by the myths, both Northern and Southern, which are propagated in justi cation of that betrayal. It involves, too, a special attitude toward the waves of immigrants who have come later and passed us by.

It has to do with a special perspective on the national ideals and the national conduct, and with a tragicomic attitude toward the universe. It has to do with special emotions evoked by the details of cities and countrysides, with forms of labor and with forms of pleasure, with sex and with love, with food and with drink, with

machines and with animals, with climates and with dwellings, with places of worship and places of entertainment, with garments and dreams and idioms of speech, with manners and customs, with religion and art, with life styles and hoping, and with that special sense of predicament and fate which gives direction and resonance to the F reedom Movement. It involves a rugged initiation into the mysteries and rites of color which makes it possible for Negro Americans to su er the injustice in which race and color are used to excuse without losing sight of either the humanity of those who in ict that injustice or the motives, rational or irrational, out of which they act. It imposes the uneasy burden and occasional joy of a complex double vision, a uid, ambivalent response to men and events which represents, at its nest, a profoundly civilized adjustment to the cost of being human in this modern world.

More important, perhaps, being a Negro American involves a *willed* (who wills to be a Negro? *I* do!) a rmation of self as against all outside pressures —an identi cation with the group as extended through the individual self which rejects all possibilities of escape that do not involve a basic resuscitation of the original American ideals of social and political justice. And those white Negroes (and I do not mean Norman Mailer’s dream creatures) are Negroes too—if they wish to be.

Howe's defense against my charge that he sees unrelieved su ering as the basic reality of Negro life is to quote favorable comments from his review of *Invisible Man*. But this does not cancel out the restricted meaning which he gives to "Negroness," or his statement that "the sociology of [the Negro writer's] existence forms a constant pressure with a *pain* and *ferocity* that nothing could remove." He charges me with unfairness for writing that he believes ideological militancy is more important than writing well; yet he tells us that "there may of course be times when one's obligation as a human being supersedes one's obligation as a writer.…" I think that the writer's obligation in a struggle as broad and abiding as the one we are engaged in, which involves not merely Negroes but all Americans, is best carried out through his role as writer. And if he

chooses to stop writing and take to the platform, then it should be out of personal choice and not under pressure from would-be managers of society.

Howe plays a game of pitty-pat with Baldwin and Ellison. First he throws them into the pit for lacking Wright's "pain," "ferocity,"

"memory," "faithfulness" and "clenched militance"; then he pats them on the head for the quality of their writing. If he would see evidence of this statement, let him observe how these terms come up in his original essay when he traces Baldwin's move toward Wright's position. Howe's rhetoric is weighted against "more modulated tones" in favor of "rasping outbursts"; the Baldwin *of Another Country* becomes "a voice of anger, rasping and thrusting,"

and he is no longer "held back" by the "proprieties of literature."

The character of Rufus in that novel displays a "ferocity" quite new in Baldwin's ction, and Baldwin's essays gain resonance from "the tone of unrelenting protest … from [their] very anger, even the violence," *etc.* I am afraid that these are "good" terms in Howe's essay and they led to part of my judgment.

In defense of Wright's novel *The Long Dream*, Howe can write:

…This book has been attacked for presenting Negro life in the South through

"old-fashioned" images of violence, but [and now we have "prescription"] one ought to hesitate before denying the relevance of such images or joining in the criticism of their use. *For Wright was perhaps justi ed* in not paying attention to the changes that have occurred in the South these past few decades. [Italics mine.]

If this isn't a defense (if not of bad writing at least of an irresponsible attitude toward good writing), I simply do not understand the language. I nd it astonishing advice, since novels exist, since the ctional spell comes into existence precisely through the care which the novelist gives to selecting the details, images, tonalities, speci c social and psychological processes of speci c characters in speci c milieus at speci c points in time. Indeed, it is one of the main tenets of the novelist's morality that he should write of that which he knows, and this is especially crucial for novelists

who deal with a society as mobile and rapidly changing as ours. To justify ignoring this basic obligation is to encourage the downgrading of literature in favor of other values—in this instance

"anger," "protest" and "clenched militancy." Novelists create not simply out of "memory" but out of memory modi ed, extended, transformed by social change. For a novelist to heed such advice as Howe's is to commit an act of artistic immorality. Amplify this back through society and the writer's failure could produce not order but chaos.

Yet Howe proceeds on the very next page of his essay to state, with no sense of contradiction, that Wright failed in some of the stories which comprise *Eight Men* ("The Man Who Lived Underground" was rst published, by the way, in 1944) because he needed the "accumulated material of circumstance." If a novelist ignores social change, how can he come by the "accumulated material of circumstance"? Perhaps if Howe could grasp the full meaning of that phrase he would understand that Wright did not report in *Black Boy* much of his life in Mississippi, and he would also see that Ross Barnett is not the whole state, that there is also a Negro Mississippi which is much more varied than that which Wright depicted.

For the critic there simply exists no substitute for the knowledge of history and literary tradition. Howe stresses Wright's comment that when he went into rooms where there were naked white women he felt like a "non-man … doubly cast out." But had Howe thought about it he might have questioned this reaction, since most young men would have been delighted with the opportunity to study, at rst hand, women usually cloaked in an armor of taboos. I wonder how Wright felt when he saw Negro women acting just as shamelessly? Clearly this was an ideological point, not a factual report. And anyone aware of the folk sources of Wright's e orts to create literature would recognize that the situation is identical with that of the countless stories which Negro men tell of the male slave called in to wash the mistress' back in the bath, of the Pullman porter invited in to share the beautiful white passenger's favors in the berth, of the bellhop seduced by the wealthy blond guest.

It is interesting that Howe should interpret my statement about Mississippi as evidence of a loss of self-control. So allow me to repeat it coldly: I fear the implications of Howe's ideas concerning the Negro writer's role as actionist more than I do the State of Mississippi. Which is not to deny the viciousness which exists there, but to recognize the degree of freedom which also exists there precisely because the repression is relatively crude, or at least it was during Wright's time, and it left the world of literature alone.

William Faulkner lived neither in Je erson nor Frenchman's Bend but in Oxford. He, too, was a Mississippian, just as the boys who helped Wright leave Jackson were the sons of a Negro college president. Both Faulkner and these boys must be recognized as part of the social reality of Mississippi. I said nothing about Ross Barnett, and I certainly did not say that Howe was a "cultural authoritarian,"

so he should not spread his honor so thin. Rather, let him look to the implications of his thinking.

Yes, and let him learn more about the South and about Negro Americans if he would speak with authority. When he points out that "the young Ralph Ellison, even while reading these great writers, could not in Macon County attend the white man's school or movie house," he certainly appears to have

me cornered. But here again he does not know the facts and he underplays choice and will.

I rode freight trains to Macon County, Alabama, during the Scottsboro trial because I desired to study with the Negro conductor-composer William L. Dawson, who was, and probably still is, the greatest classical musician in that part of the country. I had no need to attend a white university when the master I wished to study with was available at Tuskegee. Besides, why should I have wished to attend the white state-controlled university where the works of the great writers might not have been so easily available?

As for the movie-going, it is ironic but nonetheless true that one of the few instances where “separate but equal” was truly separate and equal was in a double movie house in the town of Tuskegee, where Negroes and whites were accommodated in parallel theaters, entering from the same street level through separate entrances, and with the Negro side viewing the same pictures shortly after the

showing for whites had begun. It was a product of social absurdity and, of course, no real relief from our resentment over the restriction of our freedom, but the movies were just as enjoyable or boring. And yet, is not knowing the facts more interesting, even as an isolated instance, and more stimulating to real thought than making abstract assumptions? I went to the movies to see pictures, not to be with whites. I attended a certain college because what I wanted was there. What is more, I *never* attended a white school from kindergarten through my three years of college, and yet, like Howe, I have taught and lectured for some years now at Northern, predominantly white, colleges and universities.

Perhaps this counts for little, changes little of the general condition of society, but it *is* factual and it does form a part of my sense of reality because, though it was not a part of Wright’s life, it is my own. And if Howe thinks mine is an isolated instance, let him do a bit of research.

I do not really think that Howe can make a case for himself by bringing up the complimentary remarks which he made about *Invisible Man*. I did not quarrel with them in 1952, when they were rst published, and I did not quarrel with them in my reply. His is the right of any critic to make

judgment of a novel, and I do not see the point of arguing that I achieved an aesthetic goal if it did not work for him. I can only ask that my ction be judged as art; if it fails, it fails aesthetically, not because I did or did not ght some ideological battle. I repeat, however, that Howe's strategy of bringing me into the public quarrel between Baldwin and Wright was inept. I simply did not belong in the con ict, since I knew, even then, that protest is *not* the source of the inadequacy characteristic of most novels by Negroes, but the simple failure of craft, bad writing; the desire to have protest perform the di cult tasks of art, the belief that racial su ering, social injustice or ideologies of whatever mammy-made variety, is enough. I know, also, that when the work of Negro writers has been rejected they have all too often protected their egos by blaming racial discrimination, while turning away from the fairly obvious fact that good art—and Negro musicians are ever present to demonstrate this—commands

attention of itself, whatever the writer's politics or point of view.

And they forget that publishers will publish almost anything which is written with even a minimum of competency, and that skill is developed by hard work, study and a conscious assault upon one's own fear and provincialism.

I agree with Howe that protest is an element of all art, though it does not necessarily take the form of speaking for a political or social program. It might appear in a novel as a technical assault against the styles which have gone before, or as a protest against the human condition. If *Invisible Man* is even "apparently" free from

"the ideological and emotional penalties su ered by Negroes in this country," it is because I tried to the best of my ability to transform these elements into art. My goal was not to escape or hold back, but to work through; to transcend, as the blues transcend the painful conditions with which they deal. The protest is there not because I was helpless before my racial condition, but because *I put* it there. If there is anything "miraculous" about the book it is the result of hard work undertaken in the belief that the work of art is important in itself, that it is a social action in itself.

I cannot hope to persuade Irving Howe to this view, for it seems quite obvious that he believes there are matters more important than artistic scrupulousness. I will point out, though, that the laws of literary form exert their validity upon all those who write, and that it is his slighting of the formal necessities of his essay which makes for some of our misunderstanding. After reading his reply, I gave in to my ear's suggestion that I had read certain of his phrases somewhere before, and I went to the library, where I discovered that much of his essay was taken verbatim from a review in the *Nation* of May 10, 1952, and that another section was published verbatim in the *New Republic* of February 13, 1962—the latter, by the way, being in its original context a balanced appraisal and warm farewell to Richard Wright.

But when Howe spliced these materials together with phrases from an old speech of mine, swipes at the critics of the *Sewanee* and *Kenyon* reviews (journals in which I have never published), and the Baldwin-Wright quarrel, the e ect was something other than he

must have intended. A dialectical transformation into a new quality took place, and despite the intention of Howe's content, the form made its own statement. If he would nd the absurdities he wants me to reduce to a quotation, he will really have to read his essay whole. One gets the impression that he did a paste-and-scissors job and, knowing what he intended, knowing how the separated pieces had operated by themselves, did not bother to read very carefully their combined e ect. It could happen to anyone; nevertheless, I'm glad he is not a scientist or a social engineer.

I do not understand why Howe thinks I said anything on the subject of writing about "Negro experience" in a manner which excludes what he calls "plight and protest"; he must have gotten his Negroes mixed. But as to answering his question concerning the

"ways a Negro writer can achieve personal realization apart from the common e ort of his people to win their full freedom," I suggest that he ask himself in what way a Negro writer will achieve personal realization (as writer) *after* his people shall have won their full freedom. The answer appears to be the same in both instances: he will have to go it alone! He must su er alone even as he shares the su ering of his group, and he must

write alone and pit his talents against the standards set by the best practitioners of the craft, both past and present, in any case. For the writer's real way of sharing the experience of his group is to convert its mutual su ering into lasting value. Is Howe suggesting, incidentally, that Heinrich Heine did not exist?

His question is silly, really, for there is no such thing as "full freedom" (Oh, how Howe thirsts and hungers for the absolute for *Negroes*!), just as the notion of an equality of talent is silly. I am a Negro who once played trumpet with a certain skill, but alas, I am no Louis Armstrong or Clark Terry. Willie Mays has realized himself quite handsomely as an individual despite coming from an impoverished Negro background in oppressive Alabama, and Negro Americans, like most Americans who know the value of baseball, exult in his success. I am, after all, only a minor member, not the whole damned tribe; in fact, most Negroes have never heard of me. I could shake the nation for a while with a crime or with indecent

disclosures, but my pride lies in earning the right to call myself quite simply "writer." Perhaps if I write well enough the children of today's Negroes will be proud that I did, and so, perhaps, will Irving Howe's.

Let me end with a personal note: Dear Irving, I have no objections to being placed beside Richard Wright in any estimation which is based not upon the irremediable ground of our common racial identity, but upon the quality of our achievements as writers. I respected Wright's work and I knew him, but this is not to say that he "in uenced" me as signi cantly as you assume. Consult the text!

I *sought out* Wright because I had read Eliot, Pound, Gertrude Stein and Hemingway, and as early as 1940 Wright viewed me as a potential rival—partially, it is true, because he feared I would allow myself to be used against him by political manipulators who were not Negro and who envied and hated him. But perhaps you will understand when I say he did not in uence me if I point out that while one can do nothing about choosing one's relatives, one can, as artist, choose one's "ancestors." Wright was, in this sense, a

“relative”, Hemingway an “ancestor.” Langston Hughes, whose work I knew in grade school and whom I knew before I knew Wright, was a “relative”; Eliot, whom I was to meet only many years later, and Malraux and Dostoevsky and Faulkner, were “ancestors”—if you please or don’t please!

Do you still ask why Hemingway was more important to me than Wright? Not because he was white, or more “accepted.” But because he appreciated the things of this earth which I love and which Wright was too driven or deprived or inexperienced to know: weather, guns, dogs, horses, love *and* hate and impossible circumstances which to the courageous and dedicated could be turned into bene ts and victories. Because he wrote with such precision about the processes and techniques of daily living that I could keep myself and my brother alive during the 1937 Recession by following his descriptions of wing-shooting; because he knew the di erence between politics and art and something of their true relationship for the writer. Because all that he wrote—and this is

very important—was imbued with a spirit beyond the tragic with which I could feel at home, for it was very close to the feeling of the blues, which are, perhaps, as close as Americans can come to expressing the spirit of tragedy. (And if you think Wright knew anything about the blues, listen to a “blues” he composed with Paul Robeson singing, a *most* unfortunate collaboration!; and read his introduction to Paul Oliver’s *Blues Fell This Morning.)* But most important, because Hemingway was a greater artist than Wright, who although a Negro like myself, and perhaps a great man, understood little if anything of these (at least to me) important things. Because Hemingway loved the American language and the joy of writing, making the ight of birds, the loping of lions across an African plain, the mysteries of drink and moonlight, the unique styles of diverse peoples and individuals come alive on the page.

Because he was in many ways the true father-as-artist of so many of us who came to writing during the late thirties.

I will not dwell upon Hemingway’s activities in Spain or during the liberation in Paris, for you know all of that. I will remind you, however, that any writer takes what he needs to get his own work done from wherever he

nds it. I did not need Wright to tell me how to be a Negro, or how to be angry or to express anger—Joe Louis was doing that very well—or even to teach me about socialism; my mother had canvassed for the socialists, not the Communists, the year I was born. No, I had been a Negro for twenty-two or twenty-three years when I met Wright, and in more places and under a greater variety of circumstances than he had then known. He was generously helpful in sharing his ideas and information, but I needed instruction in other values and I found them in the works of other writers—Hemingway was one of them, and T. S. Eliot initiated the search.

I like your part about Chekhov arising from his sickbed to visit the penal colony at Sakhalin Island. It was, as you say, a noble act.

But shouldn't we remember that it was signi cant only because Chekhov was *Chekhov*, the great writer? You compliment me truly, but I have not written so much or so well, even though I *have* served a certain apprenticeship in the streets and even touch events in the

Freedom Movement in a modest way. But I can also recall the story of a certain writer who succeeded with a great fanfare of publicity in having a talented murderer released from prison. It made for another very short story which ended quite tragically—though not for the writer: A few months after his release the man killed the mother of two young children. I also know of another really quite brilliant writer who, under the advice of certain wise men who were then managing the consciences of artists, abandoned the prison of his writing to go to Spain, where he was allowed to throw away his life defending a worthless hill. I have not heard his name in years but I remember it vividly; it was Christopher Cauldwell, *né* Christopher St. John Sprigg. There are many such stories, Irving. It's heads you win, tails you lose, and you are quite right about my not following Baldwin, who is urged on by a nobility—or is it a demon

—quite di erent from my own. It has cost me quite a pretty penny, indeed, but then I was always poor and not (and I know this is a sin in our America) too uncomfortable.

Dear Irving, I am still yakking on and there's many a thousand gone, but I assure you that no Negroes are beating down my door, putting pressure on

me to join the Negro Freedom Movement, for the simple reason that they realize that I am enlisted for the duration. Such pressure is coming only from a few disinterested

"military advisers," since Negroes want no more fairly articulate would-be Negro leaders cluttering up the airways. For, you see, my Negro friends recognize a certain division of labor among the members of the tribe. Their demands, like that of many whites, are that I publish more novels—and here I am remiss and vulnerable, perhaps. You will recall what the Talmud has to say about the trees of the forest and the making of books, *etc.* But then, Irving, they recognize what you have not allowed yourself to see: namely, that my reply to your essay is in itself a small though necessary action in the Negro struggle for freedom. You should not feel unhappy about this or think that I regard you either as dishonorable or an enemy. I hope, rather, that you will come to view this exchange as an act of, shall we say, "antagonistic cooperation"?

From *The New Leader*, December 9, 1963, and February 3, 1964.

Hidden Name and Complex Fate

A Writer's Experience in the United States

IN *Green Hills of Africa,* Ernest Hemingway reminds us that both Tolstoy and Stendhal had seen war, that Flaubert had seen a revolution and the Commune, that Dostoevsky had been sent to Siberia, and that such experiences were important in shaping the art of these great masters. And he goes on to observe that "writers are forged in injustice as a sword is forged." He declined to describe the many personal forms which injustice may take in this chaotic world

—who would be so mad as to try?—nor does he go into the personal wounds which each of these writers sustained. Now, however, thanks to his brother and sister, we do know something of the injustice in which he himself was forged, and this knowledge has been added to what we have long known of Hemingway's artistic temper.

In the end, however, it is the quality of his art which is primary. It is the art which allows the wars and revolutions which he knew, and the personal and social injustice which he su ered, to lay claims upon our attention, for it was through his art that they achieved their most enduring meaning. It is a matter of outrageous irony, perhaps, but in literature the great social clashes of history, no less than the painful experience of the individual, are secondary to the meaning which they take on through the skill, talent, imagination and personal vision of the writer who transforms them into art. Here they are reduced to more manageable proportions; here they are imbued with humane values; here injustice and catastrophe become less important in themselves than what the writer makes of them. This is *not* true, however, of the writer's struggle with that recalcitrant angel called Art, and it was through *this* speci c struggle that Ernest Hemingway became *Hemingway*

(now re ned to a total body of transcendent work, after forty years of being endlessly dismembered and resurrected, as it continues to be, in the styles, themes, sense of life and literature of countless other writers). And it was through this struggle with form that he became the master, the culture hero, whom we have come to know and admire.

It was suggested that it might be of interest if I discussed here this evening some of my notions of the writer's experience in the United States; hence I have invoked the name of Hemingway, not by way of inviting far-fetched comparisons but in order to establish a perspective, a set of assumptions from which I may speak, and in an attempt to avoid boring you by emphasizing those details of racial hardship which for some forty years now have been evoked whenever writers of my own cultural background have essayed their experience in public.

I do this *not* by way of denying totally the validity of these by now stylized recitals, for I have shared and still share many of their detailed injustices—what Negro can escape them?—but by way of suggesting that they are, at least in a discussion of a writer's experience, as *writer*, as artist, somewhat beside the point.

For we select neither our parents, our race nor our nation; these occur to us out of the love, the hate, the circumstances, the fate, of others. But we *do*

become writers out of an act of will, out of an act of choice: a dim, confused and ofttimes regrettable choice, perhaps, but choice nevertheless. And what happens thereafter causes all those experiences which occurred before we began to function as writers to take on a special quality of uniqueness. If this does not happen then as far as writing goes, the experiences have been misused. If we do not make of them a value, if we do not transform them into forms and images of meaning which they did not possess before, then we have failed as artists.

Thus for a writer to insist that his personal su ering is of special interest in itself, or simply because he belongs to a particular racial or religious group, is to advance a claim for special privileges which members of his group who are not writers would be ashamed to demand. The kindest judgment one can make of this point of view is

that it reveals a sad misunderstanding of the relationship between su ering and art. Thomas Mann and André Gide have told us much of this, and there are critics, like Edmund Wilson, who have told of the connection between the wound and the bow.

As I see it, it is through the process of making artistic forms—

plays, poems, novels—out of one's experience that one becomes a writer, and it is through this process, this struggle, that the writer helps give meaning to the experience of the group. And it is the process of mastering the discipline, the techniques, the fortitude, the culture, through which this is made possible that constitutes the writer's real experience as *writer*, as artist. If this sounds like an argument for the artist's withdrawal from social struggles, I would recall to you W. H. Auden's comment:

In our age, the mere making of a work of art is itself a political act. So long as artists exist, making what they please, and think they ought to make, even if it is not terribly good, even if it appeals to only a handful of people, they remind the Management of something managers need to be reminded of, namely, that the managed are people with faces, not anonymous members, that *Homo Labor ans* is also *Homo Ludens*.…

Without doubt, even the most *engagé* writer—and I refer to true artists, not to artists *manques*—begins his career in play and puzzlement, in dreaming over the details of the world in which he becomes conscious of himself.

Let Tar Baby, that enigmatic gure from Negro folklore, stand for the world. He leans, black and gleaming, against the wall of life utterly noncommittal under our scrutiny, our questioning, starkly unmoving before our naïve attempts at intimidation. Then we touch him playfully and before we can say *Sonny Liston!* we nd ourselves stuck. Our playful investigations become a labor, a fearful struggle, an *agon*. Slowly we perceive that our task is to learn the proper way of freeing ourselves to develop technique.

Sensing this, we give him our sharpest attention, we question him carefully, we struggle with more subtlety; while he, in his silent way, holds on, demanding that we perceive the necessity of calling

him by his true name as the price of our freedom. It is unfortunate that he has so many "true names"—all spelling chaos, and in order to discover even one of these we must rst come into possession of our own names. For it is through our names that we rst place ourselves in the world. Our names, being the gift of others, must be made our own.

Once, while listening to the play of a two-year-old girl who did not know she was under observation, I heard her saying over and over again, at rst with questioning and then with sounds of growing satisfaction, "I am Mimi Livisay? … *I* am Mimi Livisay. I *am* Mimi Livisay … I am *Mimi* Li-vi-say! I am Mimi …"

And in deed and in fact she was—or became so soon thereafter, by working playfully to establish the unity between herself and her name.

For many of us this is far from easy. We must learn to wear our names within all the noise and confusion of the environment in which we nd ourselves, make them the center of all of our associations with the world, with man and with nature. We must charge them with all our emotions, our hopes, hates, loves, aspirations. They must become our masks and our shields and the containers of all those values and traditions which we learn and/or imagine as being the meaning of our familial past.

And when we are reminded so constantly that we bear, as Negroes, names originally possessed by those who owned our enslaved grandparents, we are apt, especially if we are potential writers, to be more than ordinarily concerned with the veiled and mysterious events, the fusions of blood, the furtive couplings, the business transactions, the violations of faith and loyalty, the assaults; yes, and the unrecognized and unrecognizable loves through which our names were handed down unto us.

So charged with emotion does this concern become for some of us, that we have, earlier, the example of the followers of Father Divine and, now, the Black Muslims, discarding their original names in rejection of the bloodstained, the brutal, the sinful images of the past. Thus they would declare new identities, would clarify a new

program of intention and destroy the verbal evidence of a willed and ritualized discontinuity of blood and human intercourse.

Not all of us, actually only a few, seek to deal with our names in this manner. We take what we have and make of them what we can.

And there are even those who know where the old broken connections lie, who recognize their relatives across the chasm of historical denial and the arti cial barriers of society, and who see themselves as bearers of many of the qualities which were admirable in the original sources of their common line (Faulkner has made much of this); and I speak here not of mere forgiveness, nor of obsequious insensitivity to the outrages symbolized by the denial and the division, but of the conscious acceptance of the harsh realities of the human condition, of the ambiguities and hypocrisies of human history as they have played themselves out in the United States.

Perhaps, taken in aggregate, these European names (sometimes with irony, sometimes with pride, but always with personal investment) represent a certain triumph of the spirit, speaking to us of those who rallied, reassembled and transformed themselves, and who under dismembering pressures refused to die. “Brothers and sisters,” I once heard a Negro preacher exhort, “let us make up our faces before the world, and our names shall sound throughout the land with honor! For we ourselves are our *true*

names, not their epithets! So let us, I say, Make Up Our Faces and Our Minds!”

Perhaps my preacher had read T. S. Eliot, although I doubt it. And in actuality, it was unnecessary that he do so, for a concern with names and naming was very much a part of that special area of American culture from which I come, and it is precisely for this reason that this example should come to mind in a discussion of my own experience as a writer.

Undoubtedly writers begin their *conditioning* as manipulators of words long before they become aware of literature—certain Freudians would even say at the breast. Perhaps, but if so, that is far too early to be of use at this moment. Of this, though, I am certain: that despite the misconceptions of those educators who trace the reading di culties experienced by large numbers of Negro children

in Northern schools to their Southern background, these children are, in *their* familiar South, facile manipulators of words. I know, too, that the Negro community is deadly in its ability to create nicknames and to spot all that is ludicrous in an unlikely name or that which is incongruous in conduct. Names are not qualities; nor are words, in this particular sense, actions. To assume that they are could cost one his life many times a day. Language skills depend to a large extent upon a knowledge of the details, manners, objects, folkways and psychological patterns of a given environment. Humor and wit depend upon much the same awareness, and so does the suggestive power of names.

“A small brown bowlegged Negro with the name ‘Franklin D.

Roosevelt Jones’ might sound like a clown to someone who looks at him from the outside,” said my friend Albert Murray, “but on the other hand he just might turn out to be a hell of a reside operator.

He might just lie back in all of that comic juxtaposition of names and manipulate you deaf, dumb and blind—and you not even suspecting it, because you’re thrown out of stance by his name!

There you are, so dazzled by the F.D.R. image—which you *know* you can't see—and so delighted with your own superior position that you don't realize that it is *Jones* who must be confronted."

Well, as you must suspect, all of this speculation on the matter of names has a purpose, and now, because it is tied up so ironically with my own experience as a writer, I must turn to my own name.

For in the dim beginnings, before I ever thought consciously of writing, there was my own name, and there was, doubtless, a certain magic in it. From the start I was uncomfortable with it, and in my earliest years it caused me much puzzlement. Neither could I understand what a poet was, nor why, exactly, my father had chosen to name me after one. Perhaps I could have understood it perfectly well had he named me after his own father, but that name had been given to an older brother who died and thus was out of the question. But why hadn't he named me after a hero, such as Jack Johnson, or a soldier like Colonel Charles Young, or a great seaman like Admiral Dewey, or an educator like Booker T.

Washington, or a great orator and abolitionist like Frederick

Douglass? Or again, why hadn't he named me (as so many Negro parents had done) after President Teddy Roosevelt?

Instead, he named me after someone called Ralph Waldo Emerson, and then, when I was three, he died. It was too early for me to have understood his choice, although I'm sure he must have explained it many times, and it was also too soon for me to have made the connection between my name and my father's love for reading. Much later, after I began to write and work with words, I came to suspect that he was aware of the suggestive powers of names and of the magic involved in naming.

I recall an odd conversation with my mother during my early teens in which she mentioned their interest in, of all things, prenatal culture! But for a long time I actually knew only that my father read a lot, and that he admired this remote Mr. Emerson, who was something called a "poet and philosopher" so much that he named his second son after him.

I knew, also, that whatever his motives, the combination of names he'd given me caused me no end of trouble from the moment when I could talk well enough to respond to the ritualized question which grownups put to very young children. Emerson's name was quite familiar to Negroes in Oklahoma during those days when World War I was brewing, and adults, eager to show o their knowledge of literary gures, and obviously amused by the joke implicit in such a small brown nubbin of a boy carrying around such a heavy moniker, would invariably repeat my rst two names and then, to my great annoyance, they'd add "Emerson."

And I, in my confusion, would reply, "No, *no, I'm* not Emerson; he's the little boy who lives next door." Which only made them laugh all the louder. "Oh, no," they'd say, *"you're* Ralph Waldo Emerson," while I had fantasies of blue murder.

For a while the presence next door of my little friend Emerson made it unnecessary for me to puzzle too often over this peculiar adult confusion. And since there were other Negro boys named Ralph in the city, I came to suspect that there was something about the combination of names which produced their laughter. Even today I know of only one other Ralph who had as much comedy

made out of his name, a campus politician and deep-voiced orator whom I knew at Tuskegee, who was called, in friendly ribbing, *Ralph Waldo Emerson Edgar Allan Roe*, spelled Powe. This must have been quite a trial for him, but I had been initiated much earlier.

During my early school years the name continued to puzzle me, for it constantly evoked in the faces of others some secret. It was as though I possessed some treasure or some defect which was invisible to my own eyes and ears; something which I had but did *not possess*, like a piece of property in South Carolina, which was mine but which I could not have until some future time.

I recall nding, at about this time, while seeking adventure in back alleys—which possess for boys a superiority over playgrounds like that which kitchen utensils possess over toys designed for infants—a large photographic lens. I remember nothing of its optical qualities, of its speed

or color correction, but it gleamed with crystal mystery and it was beautiful. Mounted handsomely in a tube of shiny brass, it spoke to me of distant worlds of possibility. I played with it, looking through it with squinted eyes, holding it in shafts of sunlight, and tried to use it for a magic lantern. But most of this was as unrewarding as my attempts to make the music come from a phonograph record by holding the needle in my ngers. I could burn holes through newspapers with it, or I could pretend that it was a telescope, the barrel of a cannon, or the third eye of a monster— *I* being the monster —but I could do nothing at all about its proper function of making images, nothing to make it yield its secret. Still, I could not discard it. Older boys sought to get it away from me by o ering knives or tops, agate marbles or whole zoos of grass snakes and horned toads in trade, but I held on to it. No one, not even the white boys I knew, had such a lens, and it was my own good luck to have found it. Thus I would hold on to it until such time as I could acquire the parts needed to make it function. Finally I put it aside and it remained buried in my box of treasures, dusty and dull, to be lost and forgotten as I grew older and became interested in music.

By now I had reached the grades where it was necessary to learn something about Mr. Emerson and what he had written, such as the

“Concord Hymn” and the essay “Self-Reliance,” and in following his advice I reduced the “Waldo” to a simple and, I hoped, mysterious

“W,” and in my own reading I avoided his works like the plague. I could no more deal with my name—I shall never really master it—

than I could nd a creative use for my lens. Fortunately there were other problems to occupy my mind. Not that I forgot my fascination with names, but more about that later.

Negro Oklahoma City was starkly lacking in writers. In fact, there was only Roscoe Dunjee, the editor of the local Negro newspaper and a very ne editorialist in that valuable tradition of personal journalism which is now rapidly disappearing, a writer who in his emphasis upon the possibilities for justice o ered by the Constitution anticipated the antisegregation struggle by decades.

There were also a few reporters who drifted in and out, but these were about all. On the level of *conscious* culture the Negro community was biased in the direction of music.

These were the middle and late twenties, remember, and the state was still a new frontier state. The capital city was one of the great centers for southwestern jazz, along with Dallas and Kansas City.

Orchestras which were to become famous within a few years were constantly coming and going. As were the blues singers Ma Rainey and Ida Cox, and the old bands like that of King Oliver. But best of all, thanks to Mrs. Zelia N. Breaux, there was an active and enthusiastic school music program through which any child who had the interest and talent could learn to play an instrument and take part in the band, the orchestra, the brass quartet. And there was a yearly operetta and a chorus and a glee club. Harmony was taught for four years and the music appreciation program was imperative. European folk dances were taught throughout the Negro school system, and we were also taught complicated patterns of military drill.

I tell you this to point out that although there were no incentives to write, there was ample opportunity to receive an artistic discipline. Indeed, once one picked up an instrument it was di cult to escape. If you chafed at the many rehearsals of the school band or orchestra and were drawn to the many small jazz groups, you were

likely to discover that the jazzmen were apt to rehearse far more than the school band; it was only that they seemed to enjoy themselves more, and to possess a freedom of imagination which we were denied at school. And one soon learned that the wild, transcendent moments which occurred at dances or “battles of music,” moments in which memorable improvisations were ignited, depended upon dedication to a discipline observed even when rehearsals had to take place in the crowded quarters of Halley Richardson’s shoeshine parlor. It was not the place which counted, although a large hall with good acoustics was preferred, but what one did to perfect one’s performance.

If this talk of musical discipline gives the impression that there were no forces working to nourish one who would one day blunder, after many a

twist and turn, into writing, I am misleading you. And here I might give you a longish lecture on the ironies and uses of segregation. When I was a small child there was no library for Negroes in our city, and not until a Negro minister invaded the main library did we get one. For it was discovered that there was no law, only custom, which held that we could not use these public facilities. The results were the quick renting of two large rooms in a Negro o ce building (the recent site of a pool hall), the hiring of a young Negro librarian, the installation of shelves and a hurried stocking of the walls with any and every book possible. It was, in those rst days, something of a literary chaos.

But how fortunate for a boy who loved to read! I started with the fairy tales and quickly went through the junior ction, then through the Westerns and the detective novels, and very soon I was reading the classics—only I didn't know it. There were also the Haldeman Julius Blue Books, which seem to have oated on the air down from Girard, Kansas, the syndicated columns of O. O. McIntyre, and the copies of *Vanity Fair* and the *Literary Digest* which my mother brought home from work; how could I ever join uncritically in the heavy-handed attacks on the so-called Big Media which have become so common today?

There were also the pulp magazines and, more important, that other library which I visited when I went to help my adopted

grandfather, J. D. Randolph (my parents had been living in his rooming house when I was born), at his work as custodian of the law library of the Oklahoma State Capitol. Mr. Randolph had been one of the rst teachers in what became Oklahoma City, and he'd also been one of the leaders of a group who walked from Gallatin, Tennessee, to the Oklahoma Territory. He was a tall man, as brown as smoked leather, who looked like the Indians with whom he'd herded horses in the early days.

And while his status was merely as the custodian of the law library, I was to see the white legislators come down on many occasions to question him on points of law, and often I was to hear him answer without recourse to the uniform rows of books on the shelves. This was a thing to marvel at in itself, and the white lawmakers did so, but even more marvelous, ironic, intriguing, haunting—call it what you will—is the fact that the Negro who

knew the answers was named after Je erson Davis. What Tennessee lost, Oklahoma was to gain, and after gaining it (a gift of courage, intelligence, fortitude and grace), used it only in concealment and, one hopes, with embarrassment.

So, let us, I say, make up our faces and our minds!

• • •

In the loosely structured community of that time, knowledge, news of other ways of living, ancient wisdom, the latest literary fads, hate literature—for years I kept a card warning Negroes away from the polls, which had been dropped by the thousands from a plane which circled over the Negro community—information of all kinds found its level, catch-as-catch-can, in the minds of those who were receptive to it. Not that there was no conscious structuring—I read my rst Shaw and Maupassant, my rst Harvard Classics in the home of a friend whose parents were products of that stream of New England education which had been brought to Negroes by the young and enthusiastic white teachers who sta ed the schools set up for the freedmen after the Civil War. These parents were both teachers, and there were others like them in our town.

But the places where a rich oral literature was truly functional were the churches, the schoolyards, the barbershops, the cotton-picking camps—places where folklore and gossip thrived. The drug store where I worked was such a place, where on days of bad weather the older men would sit with their pipes and tell tall tales, hunting yarns and homely versions of the classics. It was here that I heard stories of searching for buried treasure and of headless horsemen, which I was told were my own father's versions told long before. There were even recitals of popular verse, "The Shooting of Dan McGrew," and, along with these, stories of Jesse James, of Negro outlaws and black United States marshals, of slaves who became the chiefs of Indian tribes, and of the exploits of Negro cowboys. There was both truth and fantasy in this, intermingled in the mysterious fashion of literature.

In their formative period, writers absorb into their consciousness much that has no special value until much later, and often much which is of no special value even then, perhaps, beyond the fact that it throbs with a ect and

mystery and in it “time and pain and royalty in the blood” are suspended in imagery. So, long before I thought of writing, I was claimed by weather, by speech rhythms, by Negro voices and their di erent idioms, by husky male voices and by the high shrill singing voices of certain Negro women, by music, by tight spaces and by wide spaces in which the eyes could wander, by death, by newly born babies, by manners of various kinds, company manners and street manners, the manners of white society and those of our own high society, and by interracial manners, by street ghts, circuses and minstrel shows, by vaudeville and moving pictures, by prize ghts and foot races, baseball games and football matches. By spring oods and blizzards, catalpa worms and jack rabbits, honeysuckle and snapdragons (which smelled like old cigar butts), by sun owers and hollyhocks, raw sugar cane and baked yams, pigs’ feet, chili and blue haw ice cream. By parades, public dances and jam sessions, Easter sunrise ceremonies and large funerals. By contests between re-and-brimstone preachers and by presiding elders who got “laughing-happy” when moved by the spirit of God.

I was impressed by expert players of the “dozens” and certain notorious bootleggers of corn whiskey. By jazz musicians and fortunetellers and by men who did anything well, by strange sicknesses and by interesting brick or razor scars, by expert cursing vocabularies as well as by exalted praying and terrifying shouting, and by transcendent playing or singing of the blues. I was fascinated by old ladies, those who had seen slavery and those who were de ant of white folk and black alike, by the enticing walks of prostitutes and by the limping walks a ected by Negro hustlers, especially those who wore Stetson hats, expensive shoes with well-starched overalls, usually with a diamond stickpin (when not in hock) in their tireless collars as their gambling uniforms.

And there were the blind men who preached on corners, and the blind men who sang the blues to the accompaniment of washboard and guitar, and the white junkmen who sang mountain music and the famous hucksters of fruit and vegetables.

And there was the Indian-Negro confusion. There were Negroes who were part Indian and who lived on reservations, and Indians who had children who lived in towns as Negroes, and Negroes who were Indians and traveled

back and forth between the groups with no trouble. And Indians who were as wild as wild Negroes, and others who were as solid and as steady as bankers. There were the teachers, too: inspiring teachers and villainous teachers who chased after the girl students, and certain female teachers who one wished would chase after young male students. And a handsome old principal of military bearing who had been blemished by his classmates at West Point when they discovered on the eve of graduation that he was a Negro. There were certain Jews, Mexicans, Chinese cooks, a German orchestra conductor and an English grocer who owned a Franklin touring car. And certain Negro mechanics

—"Cadillac Slim," "Sticks" Walker, Buddy Bunn and Oscar Pitman—

who had so assimilated the automobile that they seemed to be behind a steering wheel even as they walked the streets or danced with girls. And there were the whites who despised us and the others who shared our hardships and our joys.

There is much more, but this is su cient to indicate some of what was present even in a segregated community to form the background of my work and my sense of life.

And now comes the next step. I went to Tuskegee to study music, hoping to become a composer of symphonies, and there, during my second year, I read *The Waste Land* and that, although I was then unaware of it, was the real transition to writing.

Mrs. L. C. McFarland had taught us much of Negro history in grade school, and from her I'd learned of the New Negro Movement of the twenties, of Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson and the others. They had inspired pride and had given me a closer identi cation with poetry (by now, oddly enough, I seldom thought of my hidden name), but with music so much on my mind it never occurred to me to try to imitate them.

Still, I read their work and was excited by the glamour of the Harlem which emerged from their poems, and it was good to know that there were Negro writers. Then came *The Waste Land*.

I was much more under the spell of literature than I realized at the time. *Wuthering Heights* had caused me an agony of unexpressible emotion, and the same was true of *Jude the Obscure*, but *The Waste Land* seized my mind. I was intrigued by its power to move me while eluding my understanding. Somehow its rhythms were often closer to those of jazz than were those of the Negro poets, and even though I could not understand then, its range of allusion was as mixed and as varied as that of Louis Armstrong. Yet there were its discontinuities, its changes of pace and its hidden system of organization which escaped me.

There was nothing to do but look up the references in the footnotes to the poem, and thus began my conscious education in literature. For this, the library at Tuskegee was quite adequate and I used it. Soon I was reading a whole range of subjects drawn upon by the poet, and this led, in turn, to criticism and to Pound, Ford Madox Ford, Sherwood Anderson, Gertrude Stein, Hemingway and Fitzgerald and “round about ’til I was come” back to Melville and Twain—the writers who are taught and doubtless overtaught today.

Perhaps it was my good luck that they were not taught at Tuskegee;

I wouldn’t know. But at the time I was playing, having an intellectually interesting good time.

Having given so much attention to the techniques of music, the process of learning something of the craft and intention of modern poetry and ction seemed quite familiar. Besides, it was absolutely painless because it involved no deadlines or credits. Even then, however, a process which I described earlier had begun to operate.

The more I learned of literature in this conscious way, the more the details of my background became transformed. I heard undertones in remembered conversations which had escaped me before, local customs took on a more universal meaning, values which I hadn’t understood were revealed, some of the people whom I had known were diminished, while others were elevated in stature. More important, I began to see my own possibilities with more objective and in some ways more hopeful eyes.

The summer of 1936 I went to New York seeking work, which I did not nd, and remained there, but the personal transformation continued. Reading had become a conscious process of growth and discovery, a method of reordering the world. And that world had widened considerably.

At Tuskegee I had handled manuscripts which Proko ev had given to Hazel Harrison, a Negro concert pianist who taught there and who had known him in Europe, and through Miss Harrison I had become aware of Proko ev's symphonies. I had also become aware of the radical movement in politics and art, and in New York had begun reading the work of André Malraux, not only the ction but chapters published from his *Psychology of Art*. And in my search for an expression of modern sensibility in the works of Negro writers I discovered Richard Wright. Shortly thereafter I was to meet Wright, and it was at his suggestion that I wrote both my rst book review and my rst short story.

These were fateful suggestions. For although I had tried my hand at poetry while at Tuskegee, it hadn't occurred to me that I might write ction, but once he suggested it, it seemed the most natural thing to try. Fortunately for me, Wright, then on the verge of his rst success, was eager to talk with a beginner, and I was able to

save valuable time in searching out those works in which writing was discussed as a craft. He guided me to Henry James's prefaces, to Conrad, to Joseph Warren Beach and to the letters of Dostoevsky.

There were other advisers and other books involved, of course, but what is important here is that I was consciously concerned with the art of ction, and that almost from the beginning I was grappling quite consciously with the art through which I wished to realize myself. But this was not done in isolation; the Spanish Civil War was now in progress and the Depression was still on. The world was being shaken up, and through one of those odd instances which occur to young provincials in New York, I was to hear Malraux make an appeal for the Spanish Loyalists at the same party where I rst heard the folk singer Leadbelly perform. Wright and I were there seeking money for the magazine which he had come to New York to edit.

Art and politics: a great French novelist and a Negro folk singer, a young writer who was soon to publish *Uncle Tom's Children*, and I who had barely begun to study his craft. It is such accidents, such fortuitous meetings, which count for so much in our lives. I had never dreamed that I would be in the presence of Malraux, of whose work I became aware on my second day in Harlem when Langsten Hughes suggested that I read *Man's Fate* and *Days of Wrath* before returning them to a friend of his. And it is this fortuitous circumstance which led to my selecting Malraux as a literary

"ancestor," whom, unlike a relative, the artist is permitted to choose. There was in progress at the time all the agitation over the Scottsboro boys and the Herndon Case, and I was aware of both. I had to be; I myself had been taken o a freight train at Decatur, Alabama, only three years before while on my way to Tuskegee. But while I joined in the agitation for their release, my main energies went into learning to write.

I began to publish enough, and not too slowly, to justify my hopes for success, and as I continued, I made a most perplexing discovery

—namely, that for all his conscious concern with technique, a writer did not so much create the novel as he was created *by* the novel.

That is, one did not make an arbitrary gesture when one sought to

write. And when I say that the novelist is created by the novel, I mean to remind you that ctional techniques are not a mere set of objective tools, but something much more intimate: a way of feeling, of seeing and of expressing one's sense of life. And the process of *acquiring* technique is a process of modifying one's responses, of learning to see and feel, to hear and observe, to evoke and evaluate the images of memory and of summoning up and directing the imagination, of learning to conceive of human values in the ways which have been established by the great writers who have developed and extended the art. And perhaps the writer's greatest freedom, as artist, lies precisely in his possession of technique, for it is through technique that he comes to possess and express the meaning of his life.

Perhaps at this point it would be useful to recapitulate the route—

perhaps as mazelike as that of *Finnegans Wake*—which I have been trying to describe: that which leads from the writer's discovery of a sense of purpose, which is that of becoming a writer, and then the involvement in the passionate struggle required to master a bit of technique, and then, as this begins to take shape, the disconcerting discovery that it is *technique* which transforms the individual before he is able in turn to transform it. And in that personal transformation he discovers something else; he discovers that he has taken on certain obligations, that he must not embarrass his chosen form, and that in order to avoid this he must develop taste. He learns—and this is most discouraging—that he is involved with values which turn in their *own* way, and not in the ways of politics, upon the central issues a ecting his nation and his time. He learns that the American novel, from its rst consciousness of itself as a literary form, has grappled with the meaning of the American experience, that it has been aware and has sought to de ne the nature of that experience by addressing itself to the speci c details, the moods, the landscapes, the city-scapes, the tempo of American change. And that it has borne, at its best, the full weight of that burden of conscience and consciousness which Americans inherit as one of the results of the revolutionary circumstances of our national beginnings.

We began as a nation not through the accidents of race or religion or geography (Robert Penn Warren has dwelled on these circumstances), but when a group of men, *some* of them political philosophers, put down, upon what we now recognize as sacred papers, their conception of the nation they intended to establish on these shores. They described, as we know, the obligations of the state to the citizen, of the citizen to the state; they committed themselves to certain ideas of justice, just as they committed us to a system which would guarantee all of its citizens equality of opportunity.

I need not describe the problems which have arisen from these beginnings. I need only remind you that the contradiction between these noble ideals and the actualities of our conduct generated a guilt, an unease of spirit, from the very beginning, and that the American novel at its best has always been concerned with this basic moral predicament. During Melville's time and Twain's, it was an implicit aspect of their major themes; by the twentieth century and after the discouraging and traumatic e ect of the Civil War and

the Reconstruction it had gone underground, had become *understated*. Nevertheless it did not disappear completely, and it is to be found operating in the work of Henry James as well as that of Hemingway and Fitzgerald. And as one who believes in the impelling moral function of the novel and who believes in the moral seriousness of the form, it pleases me no end that it then comes into explicit statement again in the works of Richard Wright and William Faulkner, writers who lived close to moral and political problems which would not stay put underground.

I go into these details not to recapitulate the history of the American novel but to indicate the trend of thought which was set into motion when I began to discover the nature of that process with which I was actually involved. Whatever the opinions and decisions of critics, a novelist must arrive at his own conclusions as to the meaning and function of the form with which he is engaged, and these are, in all modesty, some of mine.

In order to orient myself I also began to learn that the American novel had long concerned itself with the puzzle of the one-and-the-

many; the mystery of how each of us, despite his origin in diverse regions, with our diverse racial, cultural, religious backgrounds, speaking his own diverse idiom of the American in his own accent, is, nevertheless, American. And with this concern with the implicit pluralism of the country and with the composite nature of the ideal character called “the American,” there goes a concern with gauging the health of the American promise, with depicting the extent to which it was being achieved and made manifest in our daily conduct.

And with all of this there still remained the speci c concerns of literature. Among these is the need to keep literary standards high, the necessity of exploring new possibilities of language which would allow it to retain that exibility and delity to the common speech which has been its glory since Mark Twain. For me this meant learning to add the wonderful resources of Negro American speech and idiom, and to bring into range as fully and eloquently as possible the complex reality of the American experience as it shaped and was shaped by the lives of my own people.

Notice that I stress as “fully as possible,” because I would no more strive to write great novels by leaving out the complexity of circumstances which go to make up the Negro experience, and which alone go to make the obvious injustice bearable, than I would think of preparing myself to become President of the United States simply by studying Negro American history or con ning myself to studying those laws a ecting civil rights.

For it seems to me that one of the obligations I took on when I committed myself to the art and form of the novel was that of striving for the broadest range, the discovery and articulation of the most exalted values. And I must squeeze these from the life which I know best. (A highly truncated impression of that life I attempted to convey to you earlier.)

If all this sounds a bit heady, remember that I did not destroy that troublesome middle name of mine; I only suppressed it. Sometimes it reminds me of my obligations to the man who named me.

It is our fate as human beings always to give up some good things for other good things, to throw o certain bad circumstances only to

create others. Thus there is a value for the writer in trying to give as thorough a report of social reality as possible. Only by doing so may we grasp and convey the cost of change. Only by considering the broadest accumulation of data may we make choices that are based upon our own hard-earned sense of reality. Speaking from my own special area of American culture, I feel that to embrace uncritically values which are extended to us by others is to reject the validity, even the sacredness, of our own experience. It is also to forget that the small share of reality which each of our diverse groups is able to snatch from the whirling chaos of history belongs not to the group alone, but to all of us. It is a property and a witness which can be ignored only to the danger of the entire nation.

I could suppress the name of my namesake out of respect for the achievements of its original bearer, but I cannot escape the obligation of attempting to achieve some of the things which he asked of the American writer. As Henry James suggested, being an American is an arduous task, and for most of us, I suspect, the di culty begins with the name.

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The Art of Fiction:

An Interview

RALPH ELLISON: Let me say right now that my book *[Invisible Man]* is not an autobiographical work.

INTERVIEWERS (ALFRED CHESTER, VILMA HOWARD): You weren't thrown out of school like the boy in your novel?

ELLISON: No, though, like him, I went from one job to another.

INTERVIEWERS: Why did you give up music and begin writing?

ELLISON: I didn't give up music, but I became interested in writing through incessant reading. In 1935 I discovered Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which moved and intrigued me but de ed my powers of analysis—such as they were—and I wondered why I had never read anything of equal intensity and sensibility by an American Negro writer. Later on, in New York, I read a poem by Richard Wright, who, as luck would have it, came to town the next week. He was editing a magazine called *New Challenge* and asked me to try a book review of E. Waters Turpin's *These Low Grounds*. On the basis of this review Wright suggested that I try a short story, which I did. I tried to use my knowledge of riding freight trains. He liked the story well enough to accept it, and it got as far as the galley proofs when it was bumped from the issue because there was too much material.

Just after that the magazine failed.

INTERVIEWERS: But you went on writing—

ELLISON: With di culty, because this was the Recession of 1937. I went to Dayton, Ohio, where my brother and I hunted and sold game to earn a living. At night I practiced writing and studied Joyce, Dostoevsky, Stein and Hemingway. Especially Hemingway; I

read him to learn his sentence structure and how to organize a story. I guess many young writers were doing this, but I also used his description of hunting when I went into the elds the next day. I had been hunting since I was eleven, but no one had broken down the process of wing-shooting for me, and it was from reading Hemingway that I learned to lead a bird. When he describes something in print, believe him; believe him even when he describes the process of art in terms of baseball or boxing; he's been there.

INTERVIEWERS: Were you a ected by the social realism of the period?

ELLISON: I was seeking to learn, and social realism was a highly regarded theory, though I didn't think too much of the so-called proletarian ction even when I was most impressed by Marxism. I was intrigued by Malraux, who at that time was being claimed by the Communists. I noticed, however, that whenever the heroes *of Man's Fate** regarded their condition during moments of heightened selfconsciousness, their thinking was something other than Marxist.

Actually they were more profoundly intellectual than their real-life counterparts. Of course Malraux was more of a humanist than most of the Marxist writers of that period—and also much more of an artist. He was the artist-revolutionary rather than a politician when he wrote *Man's Fate,* and the book lives not because of a political position embraced at the time, but because of its larger concern with the tragic struggle of humanity. Most of the social realists of the period were concerned less with tragedy than with injustice. I wasn't, and am not, primarily concerned with injustice, but with art.

INTERVIEWERS: Then you consider your novel a purely literary work as opposed to one in the tradition of social protest.

ELLISON: Now mind! I recognize no dichotomy between art and protest. Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* is, among other things, a protest against the limitations of nineteenth-century rationalism; *Don Quixote, Man's Fate, Œdipus Rex, The Trial*—all these embody protest, even against the limitation of human life itself. If social protest is antithetical to art, what then shall we make of Goya,

Dickens and Twain? One hears a lot of complaints about the so-called "protest novel," especially when written by Negroes, but it seems to me that the critics could more accurately complain about their lack of craftsmanship and their provincialism.

INTERVIEWERS: But isn't it going to be di cult for the Negro writer to escape provincialism when his literature is concerned with a minority?

ELLISON: All novels are about certain minorities: the individual is a minority. The universal in the novel—and isn't that what we're all clamoring for these days?—is reached only through the depiction of the speci c man in a speci c circumstance.

INTERVIEWERS: But still, how is the Negro writer, in terms of what is expected of him by critics and readers, going to escape his particular need for social protest and reach the "universal" you speak of?

ELLISON: If the Negro, or any other writer, is going to do what is expected of him, he's lost the battle before he takes the eld. I suspect that all the agony that goes into writing is borne precisely because the writer longs for acceptance—but it must be acceptance on his own terms. Perhaps, though, this thing cuts both ways: the Negro novelist draws his blackness too tightly around him when he sits down to write—that's what the anti-protest critics believe—but perhaps the white reader draws his whiteness around himself when he sits down to read. He doesn't want to identify himself with Negro characters in terms of our immediate racial and social situation, though on the deeper human level, identi cation can become compelling when the situation is revealed artistically. The white reader doesn't want to get too close, not even in an imaginary recreation of society. Negro writers have felt this and it has led to much of our failure.

Too many books by Negro writers are addressed to a white audience. By doing this the authors run the risk of limiting themselves to the audience's presumptions of what a Negro is or should be; the tendency is to become involved in polemics, to plead

the Negro's humanity. You know, many white people question that humanity, but I don't think that Negroes can a ord to indulge in such a false

issue. For us the question should be, What are the speci c *forms* of that humanity, and what in our background is worth preserving or abandoning? The clue to this can be found in folklore, which o ers the rst drawings of any group's character. It preserves mainly those situations which have repeated themselves again and again in the history of any given group. It describes those rites, manners, customs, and so forth, which insure the good life or destroy it, and it describes those boundaries of feeling, thought and action which that particular group has found to be the limitation of the human condition. It projects this wisdom in symbols which express the group's will to survive; it embodies those values by which the group lives and dies. These drawings may be crude, but they are nonetheless profound in that they represent the group's attempt to humanize the world. It's no accident that great literature, the products of individual artists, is erected upon this humble base.

The hero of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* and the hero of Gogol's *The Overcoat* appear in their rudimentary forms far back in Russian folklore. French literature has never ceased exploring the nature of the Frenchman … Or take Picasso—

INTERVIEWERS: HOW does Picasso t into all this?

ELLISON: Why, he's the greatest wrestler with forms and techniques of them all. Just the same, he's never abandoned the old symbolic forms of Spanish art: the guitar, the bull, daggers, women, shawls, veils, mirrors. Such symbols serve a dual function: they allow the artist to speak of complex experiences and to annihilate time with simple lines and curves, and they allow the viewer an orientation, both emotional and associative, which goes so deep that a total culture may resound in a simple rhythm, an image. It has been said that Escudero could recapitulate the history and spirit of the Spanish dance with a simple arabesque of his ngers.

INTERVIEWERS: But these are examples from homogeneous cultures.

How representative of the American nation would you say Negro

folklore is?

ELLISON: The history of the American Negro is a most intimate part of American history. Through the very process of slavery came the building of the United States. Negro folklore, evolving within a larger culture which regarded it as inferior, was an especially courageous expression. It announced the Negro's willingness to trust his own experience, his own sensibilities as to the de nition of reality, rather than allow his masters to de ne these crucial matters for him. His experience is that of America and the West, and is as rich a body of experience as one would nd anywhere. We can view it narrowly as something exotic, folksy or "low-down," or we may identify ourselves with it and recognize it as an important segment of the larger American experience—not lying at the bottom of it, but intertwined, di used in its very texture. I can't take this lightly or be impressed by those who cannot see its importance; it is important to *me*. One ironic witness to the beauty and the universality of this art is the fact that the descendants of the very men who enslaved us can now sing the spirituals and nd in the singing an exaltation of their own humanity. Just take a look at some of the slave songs, blues, folk ballads; their possibilities for the writer are in nitely suggestive. Some of them have named human situations so well that a whole corps of writers could not exhaust their universality. For instance, here's an old slave verse:

Ole Aunt Dinah, she's just like me

She work so hard she want to be free

But old Aunt Dinah's gittin' kinda ole

She's afraid to go to Canada on account of the cold.

Ole Uncle Jack, now he's a mighty "good nigger"

You tell him that you want to be free for a fac'

Next thing you know they done stripped the skin o your back.

Now old Uncle Ned, he want to be free

He found his way north by the moss on the tree

He cross that river oating in a tub The patateroiler * give him a mighty close rub*.

It's crude, but in it you have three universal attitudes toward the problem of freedom. You can re ne it and sketch in the psychological subtleties and historical and philosophical allusions, action and what not, but I don't think its basic de nition can be exhausted. Perhaps some genius could do as much with it as Mann has done with the Joseph story.

INTERVIEWERS: Can you give us an example of the use of folklore in your own novel?

ELLISON: Well, there are certain themes, symbols and images which are based on folk material. For example, there is the old saying amongst Negroes: If you're black, stay back; if you're brown, stick around; if you're white, you're right. And there is the joke Negroes tell on themselves about their being so black they can't be seen in the dark. In my book this sort of thing was merged with the meanings which blackness and light have long had in Western mythology: evil and goodness, ignorance and knowledge, and so on.

In my novel the narrator's development is one through blackness to light; that is, from ignorance to enlightenment: invisibility to visibility. He leaves the South and goes North; this, as you will notice in reading Negro folktales, is always the road to freedom, the movement upward. You have the same thing again when he leaves his underground cave for the open.

It took me a long time to learn how to adapt such examples of myth into my work—also ritual. The use of ritual is equally a vital part of the creative process. I learned a few things from Eliot, Joyce and Hemingway, but not how to adapt them. When I started writing, I knew that in both *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses* ancient myth and ritual were used to give form and signi cance to the material, but it took me a few years to realize that the myths and rites which we nd functioning in our everyday lives could be used in the same way. In my rst attempt at a novel—which I was unable

to complete—I began by trying to manipulate the simple structural unities of *beginning, middle* and *end*, but when I attempted to deal with the

psychological strata—the images, symbols and emotional con gurations—of the experience at hand, I discovered that the unities were simply cool points of stability on which one could suspend the narrative line, but beneath the surface of apparently rational human relationships there seethed a chaos before which I was helpless. People rationalize what they shun or are incapable of dealing with; these superstitions and their rationalizations become ritual as they govern behavior. The rituals become social forms, and it is one of the functions of the artist to recognize them and raise them to the level of art.

I don't know whether I'm getting this over or not. Let's put it this way: take the "Battle Royal" passage in my novel, where the boys are blindfolded and forced to ght each other for the amusement of the white observers. This is a vital part of behavior pattern in the South, which both Negroes and whites thoughtlessly accept. It is a ritual in preservation of caste lines, a keeping of taboo to appease the gods and ward o bad luck. It is also the initiation ritual to which all greenhorns are subjected. This passage which states what Negroes will see I did not have to invent; the patterns were already there in society, so that all I had to do was present them in a broader context of meaning. In any society there are many rituals of situation which, for the most part, go unquestioned. They can be simple or elaborate, but they are the connective tissue between the work of art and the audience.

INTERVIEWERS: DO you think a reader unacquainted with this folklore can properly understand your work?

ELLISON: Yes, I think so. It's like jazz; there's no inherent problem which prohibits understanding but the assumptions brought to it.

We don't all dig Shakespeare uniformly, or even Little Red Riding Hood. The understanding of art depends nally upon one's willingness to extend one's humanity and one's knowledge of human life. I noticed, incidentally, that the Germans, having no special

caste assumptions concerning American Negroes, dealt with my work simply as a novel. I think the Americans will come to view it that way in twenty years—if it's around that long.

INTERVIEWERS: Don’t you think it will be?

ELLISON: I doubt it. It’s not an important novel. I failed of eloquence, and many of the immediate issues are rapidly fading away. If it does last, it will be simply because there are things going on in its depth that are of more permanent interest than on its surface. I hope so, anyway.

INTERVIEWERS: Have the critics given you any constructive help in your writing, or changed in any way your aims in ction?

ELLISON: No, except that I have a better idea of how the critics react, of what they see and fail to see, of how their sense of life di ers with mine and mine with theirs. In some instances they were nice for the wrong reasons. In the United States—and I don’t want this to sound like an apology for my own failures—some reviewers did not see what was before them because of this nonsense about protest.

INTERVIEWERS: Did the critics change your view of yourself as a writer?

ELLISON: I can’t say that they did. I’ve been seeing by my own candle too long for that. The critics did give me a sharper sense of a larger audience, yes, and some convinced me that they were willing to judge me in terms of my writing rather than in terms of my racial identity. But there is one widely syndicated critical bankrupt who made liberal noises during the thirties and has been frightened ever since. He attacked my book as a “literary race riot.” By and large, the critics and readers gave me an a rmed sense of my identity as a writer. You might know this within yourself, but to have it a rmed by others is of utmost importance. Writing is, after all, a form of communication.

INTERVIEWER: When did you begin *Invisible Man?*

ELLISON: In the summer of 1945. I had returned from the sea, ill, with advice to get some rest. Part of my illness was due, no doubt, to the fact that I had not been able to write a novel for which I’d received a Rosenwald Fellowship the previous winter. So on a farm in Vermont where I was reading *The Hero* by Lord Raglan and speculating on the nature of Negro

leadership in the United States, I wrote the rst paragraph of *Invisible Man*, and was soon involved in the struggle of creating the novel.

INTERVIEWERS: HOW long did it take you to write it?

ELLISON: Five years, with one year out for a short novel which was unsatisfactory, ill-conceived and never submitted for publication.

INTERVIEWERS: Did you have everything thought out before you began to write *Invisible Man?*

ELLISON: The symbols and their connections were known to me. I began it with a chart of the three-part division. It was a conceptual frame with most of the ideas and some incidents indicated. The three parts represent the narrator's movement from, using Kenneth Burke's terms, purpose to passion to perception. These three major sections are built up of smaller units of three which mark the course of the action and which depend for their development upon what I hoped was a consistent and developing motivation. However, you'll note that the maximum insight on the hero's part isn't reached until the nal section. After all, it's a novel about innocence and human error, a struggle through illusion to reality. Each section begins with a sheet of paper; each piece of paper is exchanged for another and contains a de nition of his identity, or the social role he is to play as de ned for him by others. But all say essentially the same thing:

"Keep this nigger boy running." Before he could have some voice in his own destiny he had to discard these old identities and illusions; his enlightenment couldn't come until then. Once he recognizes the hole of darkness into which these papers put him, he has to burn them. That's the plan and the intention; whether I achieved this is something else.

INTERVIEWERS: Would you say that the search for identity is primarily an American theme?

ELLISON: It is *the* American theme. The nature of our society is such that we are prevented from knowing who we are. It is still a young society, and this is an integral part of its development.

INTERVIEWERS: A common criticism of “ rst novels” is that the central incident is either omitted or weak. *Invisible Man* seems to su er here; shouldn’t we have been present at the scenes which are the dividing lines in the book—namely, when the Brotherhood organization moves the narrator downtown, then back uptown?

ELLISON: I think you missed the point. The major aw in the hero’s character is his unquestioning willingness to do what is required of him by others as a way to success, and this was the speci c form of his “innocence.” He goes where he is told to go; he does what he is told to do; he does not even choose his Brotherhood name. It is chosen for him and he accepts it. He has accepted party discipline and thus cannot be present at the scene since it is not the will of the Brotherhood leaders. What is important is not the scene but his failure to question their decision. There is also the fact that no single person can be everywhere at once, nor can a single consciousness be aware of all the nuances of a large social action.

What happens uptown while he is downtown is part of his darkness, both symbolic and actual. No, I don’t feel that any vital scenes have been left out.

INTERVIEWERS: Why did you

nd it necessary to shift styles

throughout the book, particularly in the prologue and epilogue?

ELLISON: The prologue was written afterwards, really—in terms of a shift in the hero’s point of view. I wanted to throw the reader o balance, to make him accept certain non-naturalistic e ects. It was really a memoir written underground, and I wanted a foreshadowing through which I hoped the reader would view the actions which took place in the main body of the book. For another thing, the styles of life presented are di erent. In the South, where

he was trying to t into a traditional pattern and where his sense of certainty had not yet been challenged, I felt a more naturalistic treatment was adequate. The college trustee’s speech to the students is really an echo of a

certain kind of Southern rhetoric, and I enjoyed trying to recreate it. As the hero passes from the South to the North, from the relatively stable to the swiftly changing, his sense of certainty is lost and the style becomes expressionistic. Later on, during his fall from grace in the Brotherhood, it becomes somewhat surrealistic. The styles try to express both his state of consciousness and the state of society. The epilogue was necessary to complete the action begun when he set out to write his memoirs.

INTERVIEWERS: After four hundred pages you still felt the epilogue was necessary?

ELLISON: Yes. Look at it this way. The book is a series of reversals. It is the portrait of the artist as a rabble-rouser, thus the various mediums of expression. In the epilogue the hero discovers what he had not discovered throughout the book: you have to make your own decisions; you have to think for yourself. The hero comes up from underground because the act of writing and thinking necessitated it. He could not stay down there.

INTERVIEWERS: You say that the book is “a series of reversals.” It seemed to us that this was a weakness, that it was built on a series of provocative situations which were canceled by the calling up of conventional emotions—

ELLIs??: I don’t quite see what you mean.

INTERVIEWERS: Well, for one thing, you begin with a provocative situation of the American Negro’s status in society. The responsibility for this is that of the white American citizen; that’s where the guilt lies. Then you cancel it by introducing the Communist Party, or the Brotherhood, so that the reader tends to say to himself: “Ah, they’re the guilty ones. They’re the ones who mistreat him, not us.”

ELLISON: I think that’s a case of misreading. And I didn’t identify the Brotherhood as the C.P., but since you do I’ll remind you that they, too, are white. The hero’s invisibility is not a matter of being seen, but a refusal to run the risk of his own humanity, which involves guilt. This is not an attack upon white society. It is what the hero refuses to do in each section which leads to further action. He must assert and achieve his own humanity; he

cannot run with the pack and do this, and this is the reason for all the reversals. The epilogue is the most nal reversal of all; therefore it is a necessary statement.

INTERVIEWERS: And the love a airs—or almost love a airs?

ELLISON: *(Laughing)* I'm glad you put it that way. The point is that when thrown into a situation which he thinks he wants, the hero is sometimes thrown at a loss; he doesn't know how to act. After he had made this speech about the Place of the Woman in Our Society, for example, and was approached by one of the women in the audience, he thought she wanted to talk about the Brotherhood and found that she wanted to talk about *brother-and-sisterhood*. Look, didn't you nd the book at all *funny?* I felt that such a man as this character would have been incapable of a love a air; it would have been inconsistent with his personality.

INTERVIEWERS: Do you have any di culty controlling your characters? E. M. Forster says that he sometimes nds a character running away with him.

ELLISON: No, because I nd that a sense of the ritual understructure of the ction helps to guide the creation of characters. Action is the thing. We are what we do and do not do. The problem for me is to get from A to B to C. My anxiety about transitions greatly prolonged the writing of my book. The naturalists stick to case histories and sociology and are willing to compete with the camera and the tape recorder. I despise concreteness in writing, but when reality is deranged in ction, one must worry about the seams.

INTERVIEWERS: Do you have di culty turning real characters into ction?

ELLISON: Real characters are just a limitation. It's like turning your own life into ction: you have to be hindered by chronology and fact. A number of the characters just jumped out, like Rinehart and Ras.

INTERVIEWERS: Isn't Ras based on Marcus Garvey? *

ELLISON: No. In 1950 my wife and I were staying at a vacation spot where we met some white liberals who thought the best way to be friendly was to tell us what it was like to be Negro. I got mad at hearing this from

people who otherwise seemed very intelligent. I had already sketched Ras, but the passion of his statement came out after I went upstairs that night feeling that we needed to have this thing out once and for all and get it done with; then we could go on living like people and individuals. No conscious reference to Garvey is intended.

INTERVIEWERS: What about Rinehart? Is he related to Rinehart in the blues tradition, or Django Rheinhardt, the jazz musician?

ELLISON: There is a peculiar set of circumstances connected with my choice of that name. My old Oklahoma friend, Jimmy Rushing, the blues singer, used to sing one with a refrain that went: *Rinehart, Rinehart,*

It's so lonesome up here

On Beacon Hill…

which haunted me, and as I was thinking of a character who was a master of disguise, of coincidence, this name with its suggestion of inner and outer came to my mind. Later I learned that it was a call used by Harvard students when they prepared to riot, a call to chaos. Which is interesting, because it is not long after Rinehart appears in my novel that the riot breaks out in Harlem. Rinehart is my name for the personi cation of chaos. He is also intended to represent America and change. He has lived so long with chaos that he knows how to manipulate it. It is the old theme of *The Con dence Man*. He is a gure in a country with no solid past or stable class

lines; therefore he is able to move about easily from one to the other.

You know, I'm still thinking of your question about the use of Negro experience as material for ction. One function of serious literature is to deal with the moral core of a given society. Well, in the United States the Negro and his status have always stood for that moral concern. He symbolizes among other things the human and social possibility of equality. This is the moral question raised in our two great nineteenth-century novels, *Moby-Dick* and *Huckleberry Finn*.

The very center of Twain's book revolves nally around the boy's relations with Nigger Jim and the question of what Huck should do about getting Jim free after the two scoundrels have sold him. There is a magic here worth conjuring, and that reaches to the very nerve of the American consciousness, so why should I abandon it? Our so-called race problem has now lined up with the world problems of colonialism and the struggle of the West to gain the allegiance of the remaining nonwhite people who have thus far remained outside the Communist sphere; thus its possibilities for art have increased rather than lessened. Looking at the novelist as manipulator and depictor of moral problems, I ask myself how much of the achievement of democratic ideals in the United States has been a ected by the steady pressure of Negroes and those whites who were sensitive to the implications of our condition, and I know that without that pressure the position of our country before the world would be much more serious even than it is now. Here is part of the social dynamics of a great society. Perhaps the discomfort about protest in books by Negro authors comes because since the nineteenth century American literature has avoided profound moral searching. It was too painful, and besides, there were speci c problems of language and form to which the writers could address themselves. They did wonderful things, but perhaps they left the real problems untouched. There are exceptions, of course, like Faulkner, who has been working the great moral theme all along, taking it up where Mark Twain put it down.

I feel that with my decision to devote myself to the novel I took on one of the responsibilities inherited by those who practice the craft in the United States: that of describing for all that fragment of the huge diverse American experience which I know best, and which o ers me the possibility of contributing not only to the growth of the literature but to the shaping of the culture as I should like it to be. The American novel is in this sense a conquest of the frontier; as it describes our experience, it creates it.

From *The Paris Review*, Spring 1955.

* *La Condition Humaine*.

*Patroller.

*Marcus Garvey, Negro nationalist and founder of a “Back to Africa” movement in the U.S.

during the early 1900s.

II

SOUND AND THE MAINSTREAM

Living with Music

IN those days it was either live with music or die with noise, and we chose rather desperately to live. In the process our apartment—what with its booby-trappings of audio equipment, wires, discs and tapes

—came to resemble the Collier mansion, but that was later. First there was the neighborhood, assorted drunks and a singer.

We were living at the time in a tiny ground-oor-rear apartment in which I was trying to write. I say “trying” advisedly. To our right, separated by a thin wall, was a small restaurant with a juke box the size of the Roxy. To our left, a night-employed swing enthusiast who took his lullaby music so loud that every morning promptly at nine Basie’s brasses started blasting my typewriter o its stand. Our living room looked out across a small backyard to a rough stone wall to an apartment building which, towering above, caught every passing thoroughfare sound and ri ed it straight down to me. There were also howling cats and barking dogs, none capable of music worth living with, so we’ll pass them by.

But the court behind the wall, which on the far side came knee-high to a short Iroquois, was a forum for various singing and/or preaching drunks who wandered back from the corner bar. From these you sometimes heard a fair barbershop style “Bill Bailey,”

freewheeling versions of “The Bastard King of England,” the saga of Uncle Bud, or a deeply felt rendition of Leroy Carr’s “How Long Blues.” The preaching drunks took on any topic that came to mind: current events, the fate of the long-sunk *Titanic*, or the relative merits of the Giants and the

Dodgers. Naturally there was great argument and occasional ghting—none of it fatal but all of it loud.

I shouldn't complain, however, for these were rather entertaining drunks, who, like the birds, appeared in the spring and left with the rst fall cold. A more dedicated fellow was there all the time, day and night, come rain, come shine. Up on the corner lived a drunk of

legend, a true phenomenon, who could surely have quali ed as the king of all the world's winos, not excluding the French. He was neither poetic like the others nor ambitious like the singer (to whom we'll presently come), but his drinking bouts were truly awe-inspiring and he was not without his sensitivity. In the throes of his passion he would shout to the whole wide world one concise command, "Shut up!" Which was disconcerting enough to all who heard (except, perhaps, the singer), but such were the labyrinthine acoustics of courtyards and areaways that he seemed to direct his command at me. The writer's block which this produced is indescribable. On one heroic occasion he yelled his obsessive command without one interruption longer than necessary to take another drink (and with no appreciable loss of volume, penetration or authority) for three long summer days and nights, and shortly afterwards he died. Just how many lines of agitated prose he cost me I'll never know, but in all that chaos of sound I sympathized with his obsession, for I, too, hungered and thirsted for quiet. Nor did he inspire me to a painful identi cation, and for that I was thankful. Identi cation, after all, involves feelings of guilt and responsibility, and since I could hardly hear my own typewriter keys I felt in no way accountable for his condition. We were simply fellow victims of the madding crowd. May he rest in peace.

No, these more involved feelings were aroused by a more intimate source of noise, one that got beneath the skin and worked into the very structure of one's consciousness—like the "fate" motif in Beethoven's Fifth or the knocking-at-the-gates scene in *Macbeth*. For at the top of our pyramid of noise there was a singer who lived directly above us; you might say we had a singer on our ceiling.

Now, I had learned from the jazz musicians I had known as a boyin Oklahoma City something of the discipline and devotion to his art required

of the artist. Hence I knew something of what the singer faced. These jazzmen, many of them now world-famous, lived for and with music intensely. Their driving motivation was neither money nor fame, but the will to achieve the most eloquent expression of idea-emotions through the technical mastery of their instruments (which, incidentally, some of them wore as a priest

wears the cross) and the give and take, the subtle rhythmical shaping and blending of idea, tone and imagination demanded of group improvisation. The delicate balance struck between strong individual personality and the group during those early jam sessions was a marvel of social organization. I had learned too that the end of all this discipline and technical mastery was the desire to express an a rmative way of life through its musical tradition, and that this tradition insisted that each artist achieve his creativity within its frame. He must learn the best of the past, and add to it his personal vision. Life could be harsh, loud and wrong if it wished, but they lived it fully, and when they expressed their attitude toward the world it was with a uid style that reduced the chaos of living to form.

The objectives of these jazzmen were not at all those of the singer on our ceiling, but though a purist committed to the mastery of the *bel canto* style, German *lieder*, modern French art songs and a few American slave songs sung as if *bel canto*, she was intensely devoted to her art. From morning to night she vocalized, regardless of the condition of her voice, the weather or my screaming nerves. There were times when her notes, sifting through her oor and my ceiling, bouncing down the walls and ricocheting o the building in the rear, whistled like tenpenny nails, buzzed like a saw, wheezed like the asthma of a Hercules, trumpeted like an enraged African elephant, and the squeaky pedal of her piano rested plumb center above my typing chair. After a year of non-co-operation from the neighbor on my left I became desperate enough to cool down the hot blast of his phonograph by calling the cops, but the singer presented a serious ethical problem: could I, an aspiring artist, complain against the hard work and devotion to craft of another aspiring artist?

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Then there was my sense of guilt. Each time I prepared to shatter the ceiling in protest I was restrained by the knowledge that I, too, during my boyhood, had tried to master a musical instrument and to

the great distress of my neighbors—perhaps even greater than that which I now su ered. For while our singer was concerned basically with a single tradition and style, I had been caught actively between two: that of Negro folk music, both sacred and profane, slave song and jazz, and that of Western classical music. It was most confusing; the folk tradition demanded that I play what I heard and felt around me, while those who were seeking to teach the classical tradition in the schools insisted that I play strictly according to the book and express that which I was *supposed* to feel. This sometimes led to heated clashes of wills. Once during a third-grade music appreciation class a friend of mine insisted that it was a large green snake he saw swimming down a quiet brook instead of the snowy bird the teacher felt that Saint-Saëns's *Carnival of the Animals* should evoke. The rest of us sat there and lied like little black, brown and yellow Trojans about that swan, but our stalwart classmate held rm to his snake. In the end he got himself spanked and reduced the teacher to tears, but truth, reality and our environment were redeemed. For we were all familiar with snakes, while a swan was simply something the Ugly Duckling of the story grew up to be.

Fortunately some of us grew up with a genuine appreciation of classical music *despite* such teaching methods. But as an aspiring trumpeter I was to wallow in sin for years before being awakened to guilt by our singer.

Caught mid-range between my two traditions, where one attitude often clashed with the other and one technique of playing was by the other opposed, I caused whole blocks of people to su er.

Indeed, I terrorized a good part of an entire city section. During summer vacation I blew sustained tones out of the window for hours, usually starting—especially on Sunday mornings—before breakfast. I sputtered whole days through M. Arban's (he's the great authority on the instrument) double-and triple-tonguing exercises, with an e ect like that of a jackass hiccupping o a big meal of briars. During school-term mornings I practiced a truly exhibitionist

“Reveille” before leaving for school, and in the evening I generously gave the ever-listening world a long, slow version of “Taps,” ineptly played but throbbing with what I in my adolescent vagueness felt

was a romantic sadness. For it was farewell to day and a love song to life and a peace-be-with-you to all the dead and dying.

On hot summer afternoons I tormented the ears of all not blessedly deaf with imitations of the latest hot solos of Hot Lips Paige (then a local hero), the leaping right hand of Earl “Fatha”

Hines, or the rowdy poetic ights of Louis Armstrong. Naturally I rehearsed also such school-band standbys as the *Light Cavalry* Overture, Sousa’s “Stars and Stripes Forever,” the *William Tell* Overture, and “Tiger Rag.” (Not even an after-school job as o ce boy to a dentist could stop my e orts. Frequently, by way of encouraging my development in the proper cultural direction, the dentist asked me proudly to render Schubert’s *Serenade* for some poor devil with his jaw propped open in the dental chair. When the drill got going, or the forceps bit deep, I blew real strong.) Sometimes, inspired by the even then considerable virtuosity of the late Charlie Christian (who during our school days played marvelous ri s on a cigar-box banjo), I’d give whole summer afternoons and the evening hours after heavy suppers of black-eyed peas and turnip greens, cracklin’ bread and buttermilk, lemonade and sweet potato cobbler, to practicing hard-driving blues. Such food oversupplied me with bursting energy, and from listening to Ma Rainey, Ida Cox and Clara Smith, who made regular appearances in our town, I knew exactly how I wanted my horn to sound. But in the e ort to make it do so (I was no embryo Joe Smith or Tricky Sam Nanton), I sustained the curses of both Christian and in del—

along with the encouragement of those more sympathetic citizens who understood the profound satisfaction to be found in expressing oneself in the blues.

Despite those who complained and cried to heaven for Gabriel to blow a chorus so heavenly sweet and so hellishly hot that I’d forever put down my horn, there were more tolerant ones who were willing to pay in present pain for future pride.

For who knew what skinny kid with his chops wrapped around a trumpet mouthpiece and a faraway look in his eyes might become the next Armstrong? Yes, and send you, at some big dance a few years hence, into an ecstasy of rhythm and memory and brassy

a rmation of the goodness of being alive and part of the community? Someone had to, for it was part of the group tradition, though that was not how they said it.

“Let that boy blow,” they’d say to the protesting ones. “He’s got to talk baby talk on that thing before he can preach on it. Next thing you know he’s liable to be up there with Duke Ellington. Sure, plenty Oklahoma boys are up there with the big bands. Son, let’s hear you try those ‘Trouble in Mind Blues.’ Now try and make it sound like ole Ida Cox sings it.”

And I’d draw in my breath and do Miss Cox great violence.

Thus the crimes and aspirations of my youth. It had been years since I had played the trumpet or irritated a single ear with other than the spoken or written word, but as far as my singing neighbor was concerned I had to hold my peace. I was forced to listen, and in listening I soon became involved to the point of identi cation. If she sang badly I’d hear my own futility in the windy sound; if well, I’d stare at my typewriter and despair that I would ever make my prose so sing. She left me neither night nor day, this singer on our ceiling, and as my writing languished I became more and more upset. Thus one desperate morning I decided that since I seemed doomed to live within a shrieking chaos I might as well contribute my share; perhaps if I fought noise with noise I’d attain some small peace.

Then a miracle: I turned on my radio (an old Philco AM set connected to a small Pilot FM tuner) and heard the words *Art thou troubled?*

Music will calm thee…

I stopped as though struck by the voice of an angel. It was Kathleen Ferrier, that loveliest of singers, giving voice to the aria from Handel’s *Rodelinda*. The voice was so completely expressive of words and music that I accepted it without question; what lover of the vocal art could resist her?

Yet it was ironic, for after giving up my trumpet for the typewriter I had avoided too close a contact with the very art which she recommended as balm. For I had started music early and lived

with it daily, and when I broke I tried to break clean. Now in this magical moment all the old love, the old fascination with music superbly rendered, ooded back. When she nished I realized that with such music in my own apartment, the chaotic sounds from without and above had sunk, if not into silence, then well below the level where they mattered. Here was a way out. If I was to live and write in that apartment, it would be only through the grace of music. I had tuned in a Ferrier recital, and when it ended I rushed out for several of her records, certain that now deliverance was mine.

But not yet. Between the hi-record and the ear, I learned, there was a new electronic world. In that realization our apartment was well on its way toward becoming an audio booby trap. It was 1949, and I rushed to the Audio Fair. I have, I confess, as much gadget resistance as the next American of my age, weight and slight income, but little did I dream of the test to which it would be put. I had hardly entered the fair before I heard David Sarser's and Mel Sprinkle's Musician's Ampli er, took a look at its schematic and, recalling a boyhood acquaintance with such matters, decided that I could build one. I did—several times—before it measured within speci cations. And still our system was lacking. Fortunately my wife shared my passion for music, so we went on to buy, piece by piece, a ne speaker system, a rst-rate AM-FM tuner, a transcription turntable and a speaker cabinet. I built half a dozen or more preampli ers and record compensators before nding a commercial one that satis ed my ear, and nally we acquired an arm, a magnetic cartridge and—glory of the house—a tape recorder. All this plunge into electronics, mind you, had as its simple end the enjoyment of recorded music as it was intended to be heard. I was obsessed with the idea of reproducing sound with such delity that even when using music as a defense behind which I could write, it would reach the unconscious levels of the mind with the least distortion. But it didn't come easily. There were wires and pieces of equipment all over the tiny apartment (I became a compulsive experimenter), and it was worth your life to move about without rst taking careful bearings. Once we were almost crushed in our

sleep by the tape machine, for which there was space only on a shelf at the head of our bed.

But it was worth it. For now when we played a recording on our system even the drunks on the wall could recognize its quality. I'm ashamed to admit, however, that I did not always restrict its use to the demands of pleasure or defense. Indeed, with such marvels of science at my control I lost my humility. My ethical consideration for the singer up above shriveled like a plant in too much sunlight.

For instead of soothing, music seemed to release the beast in me.

Now when jarred from my writer's reveries by some especially enthusiastic ourish of our singer, I'd rush to my music system with blood in my eyes and burst a few decibels in her direction. If she de ed me with a few more pounds of pressure against her diaphragm, then a war of decibels was declared.

If, let us say, she were singing *"Depuis le Jour"* from *Louise*, I'd put on a tape of Bidu Sayão performing the same aria, and let the rafters ring. If it was some song by Mahler, I'd match her spitefully with Marian Anderson or Kathleen Ferrier; if she o ended with something from *Der Rosenkavalier*, I'd attack her ank with Lotte Lehmann. If she brought me up from my desk with art songs by Ravel or Rachmanino , I'd defend myself with Maggie Teyte or Jennie Tourel. If she polished a spiritual to a meaningless artiness I'd play Bessie Smith to remind her of the earth out of which we came. Once in a while I'd forget completely that I was supposed to be a gentleman and blast her with Strauss's *Zarathustra*, Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra*, Ellington's "Flaming Sword," the famous crescendo from *The Pines of Rome*, or Satchmo scatting "I'll be Glad When You're Dead" (you rascal you!). Oh, I was living with music with a sweet vengeance.

One might think that all this would have made me her most hated enemy, but not at all. When I met her on the stoop a few weeks after my rebellion, expecting her fully to slap my face, she astonished me by complimenting our music system. She even questioned me concerning the artists I had used against her. After that, on days when the acoustics were right, she'd stop singing until the piece was nished and then applaud—not always, I guessed,

without a justi able touch of sarcasm. And although I was now getting on with my writing, the unfairness of this business bore in upon me. Aware that I could not have withstood a similar comparison with literary artists of like caliber, I grew remorseful. I also came to admire the singer's courage and control, for she was neither intimidated into silence nor goaded into undisciplined screaming; she persevered, she marked the phrasing of the great singers I sent her way, she improved her style.

Better still, she vocalized more softly, and I, in turn, used music less and less as a weapon and more for its magic with mood and memory. After a while a simple twirl of the volume control up a few decibels and down again would bring a live-and-letlive reduction of her volume.

We have long since moved from that apartment and that most interesting neighborhood, and now the oors and walls of our present apartment are adequately thick, and there is even a closet large enough to house the audio system; the only wire visible is that leading from the closet to the corner speaker system. Still, we are indebted to the singer and the old environment for forcing us to discover one of the most deeply satisfying aspects of our living.

Perhaps the enjoyment of music is always su used with past experience; for me, at least, this is true.

It seems a long way and a long time from the glorious days of Oklahoma jazz dances, the jam sessions at Halley Richardson's place on Deep Second, from the phonographs shouting the blues in the back alleys I knew as a delivery boy, and from the days when watermelon men with voices like mellow bugles shouted their wares in time with the rhythm of their horses' hoofs, and farther still from the washerwomen singing slave songs as they stirred sooty tubs in sunny yards; and a long time, too, from those intense, con icting days when the school music program of Oklahoma City was tuning our earthy young ears to classical accents, with music appreciation classes and free musical instruments and basic instruction for any child who cared to learn, and uniforms for all who made the band.

There was a mistaken notion on the part of some of the teachers that classical music had nothing to do with the rhythms, relaxed or

hectic, of daily living, and that one should crook the little nger when listening to such re ned strains. And the blues, the spirituals and jazz? They would have destroyed them and scattered the pieces.

Nevertheless, we learned some of it all, for in the United States when traditions are juxtaposed they tend, regardless of what we do to prevent it, irresistibly to merge. Thus, musically at least, each child in our town was an heir of all the ages. One learns by moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar, and while it might sound incongruous at rst, the step from the spirituality of the spirituals to that of the Beethoven of the symphonies or the Bach of the chorales is not as vast as it seems. Nor is the romanticism of a Brahms or Chopin completely unrelated to that of Louis Armstrong. Those who know their native culture and love it unchauvinistically are never lost when encountering the unfamiliar.

Living with music today we nd Mozart and Ellington, Kirsten Flagstad and Chippie Hill, William L. Dawson and Carl Or all forming part of our regular fare. For all exalt life in rhythm and melody; all add to its signi cance. Perhaps in the swift change of American society in which the meanings of one's origin are so quickly lost, one of the chief values of living with music lies in its power to give us an orientation in time. In doing so, it gives signi cance to all those inde nable aspects of experience which nevertheless help to make us what we are. In the swift whirl of time music is a constant, reminding us of what we were and of that toward which we aspire. Art thou troubled? Music will not only calm, it will ennoble thee.

From *High Fidelity*, December 1955.

The Golden Age, Time Past

That which we do is what we are. That which we remember is, more often than not, that which we would like to have been, or that which we hope to be. Thus our memory and our identity are ever at odds, our history ever a tall tale told by inattentive idealists.

IT has been a long time now, and not many remember how it was in the old days, not really. Not even those who were there to see and hear as it happened, who were pressed in the crowds beneath the dim rosy lights of

the bar in the smoke-veiled room, and who shared, night after night, the mysterious spell created by the talk, the laughter, grease paint, powder, perfume, sweat, alcohol and food—all blended and simmering, like a stew on the restaurant range, and brought to a sustained moment of elusive meaning by the timbres and accents of musical instruments locked in passionate recitative. It has been too long now, some seventeen years.

Above the bandstand there later appeared a mural depicting a group of jazzmen holding a jam session in a narrow Harlem bedroom. While an exhausted girl with shapely legs sleeps on her stomach in a big brass bed, they bend to their music in a quiet concatenation of unheard sound: a trumpeter, a guitarist, a clarinetist, a drummer, their only audience a small, cock-eared dog.

The clarinetist is white. The guitarist strums with an enigmatic smile. The trumpet is muted. The barefooted drummer, beating a folded newspaper with whisk-brooms in lieu of a drum, stirs the eye’s ear like a blast of brasses in a midnight street. A bottle of port rests on a dresser, but like the girl it is ignored. The artist, Charles Graham, adds mystery to, as well as illumination within, the scene by having them play by the light of a kerosene lamp. The painting, executed in a harsh documentary style reminiscent of W.P.A. art, conveys a feeling of musical e ort caught in timeless and

unrhetorical suspension, the sad remoteness of a scene observed through a wall of crystal.

Except for the lamp, the room might well have been one in the Hotel Cecil, the building on 118th Street in which Minton's Playhouse is located, and although painted in 1946, some time after the revolutionary doings there had begun, the mural should help recall the old days vividly. But the décor of the place has been changed, and now it is covered most of the time by draperies. These require a tricky skill of those who would draw them aside. And even then there will still only be the girl who must sleep forever unhearing, and the men who must forever gesture the same soundless tune. Besides, the time it celebrates is dead and gone, and perhaps not even those who came when it was still fresh and new remember those days as they were.

Neither do those remember who knew Henry Minton, who gave the place his name. Nor those who shared in the noisy lostness of New York the rediscovered community of the feasts, evocative of home, of South, of good times, the best and most unselfconscious of times, created by the generous portions of Negro American cuisine

—the hash, grits, fried chicken, the ham-seasoned vegetables, the hot biscuits and rolls and the free whiskey—with which, each Monday night, Teddy Hill honored the entire cast of current Apollo Theatre shows. They were gathered here from all parts of America, and they broke bread together, and there was a sense of good feeling and promise, but what shape the ful lled promise would take they did not know, and few except the more restless of the younger musicians even questioned. Yet it was an exceptional moment and the world was swinging with change.

Most of them, black and white alike, were hardly aware of where they were or what time it was; nor did they wish to be. They thought of Minton's as a sanctuary, where in an atmosphere blended of nostalgia and a music-and-drink-lulled suspension of time they could retreat from the wartime tensions of the town. The meaning of time-present was not their concern; thus when they try to tell it now the meaning escapes them. For they were caught up in

events which made that time exceptionally and uniquely *then*, and which brought,

among the other changes which have reshaped the world, a momentous modulation into a new key of musical sensibility—in brief, a revolution in culture.

So how *can* they remember? Even in swiftly changing America there are few such moments, and at best Americans give but a limited attention to history. Too much happens too rapidly, and before we can evaluate it, or exhaust its meaning or pleasure, there is something new to concern us. Ours is the tempo of the motion picture, not that of the still camera, and we waste experience as we wasted the forest. During the time it was happening the sociologists were concerned with the riots, unemployment and industrial tensions of the time, the historians with the onsweep of the war, and the critics and most serious students of culture found this area of our national life of little interest. So it was left to those who came to Minton's out of the needs of feeling, and when the moment was past no one retained more than a fragment of its happening. Afterward the very e ort to put the fragments together transformed them, so that in place of true memory they now summon to mind pieces of legend. They retell the stories as they have been told and written, glamorized, in ated, made neat and smooth, with all incomprehensible details vanished along with most of the wonder—

not how it was as they themselves knew it.

When asked how it was back then, back in the forties, they will smile; then, frowning with the puzzlement of one attempting to recall the details of a pleasant but elusive dream, they'll say: "Oh, man, it was a hell of a time! A wailing time! Things were jumping, you couldn't get in here for the people. The place was packed with celebrities. Park Avenue, man! Big people in show business, college professors along with the pimps and their women. And college boys and girls. Everybody came. You know how the old words to the

'Basin Street Blues' used to go before Sinatra got hold of it? *Basin Street is the street where the dark and the light folks meet*—that's what I'm talking

about. That was Minton’s, man. It was a place where everybody could come to be entertained because it was a place that was jumping with good times.”

Or some will tell you that it was here that Dizzy Gillespie found his own trumpet voice; that here Kenny Clarke worked out the patterns of his drumming style; where Charlie Christian played out the last creative and truly satisfying moments of his brief life, his New York home; where Charlie Parker built the monument of his art; where Thelonius Monk formulated his contribution to the chordal progressions and the hide-and-seek melodic methods of modern jazz. And they’ll call such famous names as Lester Young, Ben Webster and Coleman Hawkins; or Fats Waller, who came here in the after-hours stillness of the early morning to compose. They’ll tell you that Benny Goodman, Art Tatum, Count Basie and Lena Horne would drop in to join in the fun; that it was here that George Shearing played on his rst night in the United States; or of Tony Scott’s great love of the place; and they’ll repeat all the stories of how, when and by whom the word “bebop” was coined here—but, withal, few actually remember, and these leave much unresolved.

Usually music gives resonance to memory (and Minton’s was a hotbed of jazz), but not the music then in the making here. It was itself a texture of fragments, repetitive, nervous, not fully formed; its melodic lines underground, secret and taunting; its ri s jeering

—“Salt peanuts! Salt peanuts!”—its timbres at or shrill, with a minimum of thrilling vibrato. Its rhythms were out of stride and seemingly arbitrary, its drummers frozen-faced introverts dedicated to chaos. And in it the steady ow of memory, desire and de ned experience summed up by the traditional jazz beat and blues mood seemed swept like a great river from its old, deep bed. We know better now, and recognize the old moods in the new sounds, but what we know is that which was then becoming. For most of those who gathered here, the enduring meaning of the great moment at Minton’s took place o to the side, beyond the range of attention, like a death blow glimpsed from the corner of the eye, the revolutionary rumpus sounding like a series of ubbed notes blasting the talk with discord. So that the events which made Minton’s *Minton’s* arrived in con ict and ran their course; then

the heat was gone and all that is left to mark its passage is the controlled fury of the music itself, sealed pure and irrevocable,

banalities and excellencies alike, in the early recordings, or swept along by our restless quest for the new, to be diluted in more recent styles, the best of it absorbed like drops of fully distilled technique, mood and emotions into the great stream of jazz.

Left also to confuse our sense of what happened is the word

“bop,” hardly more than a nonsense syllable, by which the music synthesized at Minton’s came to be known. A most inadequate word which does little, really, to help us remember. A word which throws up its hands in clownish self-deprecation before all the complexity of sound and rhythm and self-assertive passion which it pretends to name, a mask-word for the charged ambiguities of the new sound, hiding the serious face of art.

Nor does it help that so much has come to pass in the meantime.

There have been two hot wars and that which continues, called

“cold.” And the unknown young men who brought a new edge to the sound of jazz and who scrambled the rhythms of those who used the small clear space at Minton’s for dancing are no longer so young or unknown; indeed, they are referred to now by nickname in even the remotest of places. And in Paris and Munich and Tokyo they’ll tell you the details of how, after years of trying, “Dizzy” (meaning John Birks Gillespie) vanquished “Roy” (meaning Roy Eldridge) during a jam session at Minton’s, to become thereby the new king of trumpeters. Or how, later, while jetting over the world on the blasts of his special tilt-belled horn, he jammed with a snake charmer in Pakistan. “Sent the bloody cobra, man,” they’ll tell you in London’s Soho. So their subsequent fame has blurred the sharp, ugly lines of their rebellion even in the memories of those who found them most strange and distasteful.

What’s more, our memory of some of the more brilliant young men has been touched by the aura of death, and we feel guilt that the fury of their passing was the price paid for the art they left us to enjoy unscathed:

Charlie Christian, burned out by tuberculosis like a guitar consumed in a tenement re; Fats Navarro, wrecked by the tensions and needling temptations of his orgiastic trade, a big man physically as well as musically, shrunken to nothingness; and, most notably of all, Charlie Parker, called "Bird," now dei ed, worshiped

and studied and, like any fertility god, mangled by his admirers and imitators, who coughed up his life and died—as incredibly as the leopard which Hemingway tells us was found "dried and frozen"

near the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro—in the hotel suite of a Baroness. (Nor has anyone explained what a "yardbird" was seeking at that social altitude, though we know that ideally anything is possible within a democracy, and we know quite well that upper-class Europeans were seriously interested in jazz long before Newport became hospitable.) All this is too much for memory; the dry facts are too easily lost in legend and glamour. (With jazz we are yet not in the age of history, but linger in that of folklore.) We know for certain only that the strange sounds which they and their fellows threw against the hum and buzz of vague signi cation that seethed in the drinking crowd at Minton's, and which, like disgruntled conspirators meeting fatefully to assemble the random parts of a bomb, they joined here and beat and blew into a new jazz style these sounds we know now to have become the clichés, the technical exercises and the standard of achievement not only for edgling musicians all over the United States, but for Dutchmen and Swedes, Italians and Frenchmen, Germans and Belgians, and even Japanese. All these, in places which came to mind during the Minton days only as points where the war was in progress and where one might soon be sent to ght and die, are now spotted with young men who study the discs on which the revolution hatched in Minton's is preserved with all the intensity that young American painters bring to the works, say, of Kandinsky, Picasso and Klee.

Surely this is an odd swing of the cultural tide. Yet Stravinsky, Webern and Berg notwithstanding, or, more recently, Boulez or Stockhausen, such young men (many of them excellent musicians in the highest European tradition) nd in the music made articulate at Minton's some key to a fuller freedom of self-realization. Indeed, for many young Europeans the

developments which took place here and the careers of those who brought it about have become the latest episodes in the great American epic. They collect the recordings and thrive on the legends as eagerly, perhaps, as young Americans.

Today the bartenders at Minton's will tell you how they come fresh o the ships or planes, bringing their brightly expectant and—

in this Harlem atmosphere—startlingly innocent European faces, to buy drinks and stand looking about for the source of the mystery.

They try to reconcile the quiet reality of the place with the events which red, at such long range, their imaginations. They come as to a shrine—as we to the Louvre, Notre Dame or St. Peter's; as young Americans hurry to the Café Flore, the Deux Magots, the Rotonde or the Café du Dôme in Paris. For some years now they have been coming to ask, with all the solemnity of pilgrims inquiring of a sacred relic, to see the nicotine-stained ampli er which Teddy Hill provided for Charlie Christian's guitar. And this is quite proper, for every shrine should have its relic.

Perhaps Minton's has more meaning for European jazz fans than for Americans, even for those who regularly went there. Certainly it has a *di erent* meaning. For them it is associated with those continental cafés in which great changes, political and artistic, have been plotted; it is to modern jazz what the Café Voltaire in Zurich is to the Dadaist phase of modern literature and painting. Few of those who visited Harlem during the forties would associate it so, but there is a context of meaning in which Minton's and the musical activities which took place there can be meaningfully placed.

Jazz, for all the insistence of the legends, has been far more closely associated with cabarets and dance halls than with brothels, and it was these which provided both the employment for the musicians and an audience initiated and aware of the overtones of the music; which knew the language of ri s, the unstated meanings of the blues idiom, and the dance steps developed from, and complementary to, its rhythms. And in the beginning it was in the Negro dance hall and night club that jazz was most completely a part of a total cultural expression, and in which it was freest and most

satisfying, both for the musicians and for those in whose lives it played a major role. As a night club in a Negro community, then, Minton's was part of a national pattern.

But in the old days Minton's was far more than this; it was also a rendezvous for musicians. As such, and although it was not formally

organized, it goes back historically to the rst New York center of Negro musicians, the Clef Club. Organized in 1910, during the start of the great migration of Negroes northward, by James Reese Europe, the director whom Irene Castle credits with having invented the fox trot, the Clef Club was set up on West 53rd Street to serve as a meeting place and booking o ce for Negro musicians and entertainers. Here wage scales were regulated, musical styles and techniques worked out, and entertainment was supplied for such establishments as Rector's and Delmonico's, and for such producers as Florenz Ziegfeld and Oscar Hammerstein. Later, when Harlem evolved into a Negro section, a similar function was served by the Rhythm Club, located then in the old Lafayette Theatre building on 132nd Street and Seventh Avenue. Henry Minton, a former saxophonist and o cer of the Rhythm Club, became the rst Negro delegate to Local 802 of the American Federation of Musicians, and was thus doubly aware of the needs, artistic as well as economic, of jazzmen. He was generous with loans, was fond of food himself and, as an old acquaintance recalled, "loved to put a pot on the range" to share with unemployed friends. Naturally when he opened Minton's Playhouse many musicians made it their own.

Henry Minton also provided, as did the Clef and Rhythm clubs, a necessity more important to jazz musicians than food: a place in which to hold their interminable jam sessions. And it is here that Minton's becomes most important to the development of modern jazz. It is here, too, that it joins up with all the countless rooms, private and public, in which jazzmen have worked out the secrets of their craft. Today jam sessions are o ered as entertainment by night clubs and on radio and television, and some are quite exciting, but what is seen and heard is only one aspect of the true jam session: the "cutting session," or contest of improvisational skill and physical endurance between two or more musicians. But the jam session is far more than this, and when carried out by musicians in the privacy of

small rooms (as in the mural at Minton’s), or in such places as Halley Richardson’s shoeshine parlor in Oklahoma City (where I rst heard Lester Young jamming in a shine chair, his head thrown back, his horn even then outthrust, his feet working on the footrests,

as he played with and against Lem Johnson, Ben Webster—(this was 1929—and other members of the old Blue Devils Orchestra) or during the after hours in Piney Brown’s old Sunset Club in Kansas City; in such places as these, with only musicians and jazzmen present, then the jam session is revealed as the jazzman’s true academy.

It is here that he learns tradition, group techniques and style. For although since the twenties many jazzmen have had conservatory training and are well grounded in formal theory and instrumental technique, when we approach jazz we are entering quite a di erent sphere of training. Here it is more meaningful to speak not of courses of study, of grades and degrees, but of apprenticeship, ordeals, initiation ceremonies, of rebirth. For after the jazzman has learned the fundamentals of his instrument and the traditional techniques of jazz—the intonations, the mute work, manipulation of timbre, the body of traditional styles—he must then “ nd himself,”

must be reborn, must nd, as it were, his soul. All this through achieving that subtle identi cation between his instrument and his deepest drives which will allow him to express his own unique ideas and his own unique voice. He must achieve, in short, his self-determined identity.

In this his instructors are his fellow musicians, especially the acknowledged masters, and his recognition of manhood depends upon their acceptance of his ability as having reached a standard which is all the more di cult for not having been rigidly codi ed.

This does not depend upon his ability to simply hold a job, but upon his power to express an individuality in tone. Nor is his status ever unquestioned, for the health of jazz and the unceasing attraction which it holds for the musicians themselves lies in the ceaseless warfare for mastery and recognition—not among the general public, though commercial success is not spurned, but among their artistic peers. And even the greatest can never rest on past accomplishments, for, as with the fast guns of the Old

West, there is always someone waiting in a jam session to blow him literally, not only down, but into shame and discouragement.

By making his club hospitable to jam sessions even to the point that customers who were not musicians were crowded out, Henry Minton provided a retreat, a homogeneous community where a collectivity of common experience could nd continuity and meaningful expression. Thus the stage was set for the birth of bop.

In 1941 Mr. Minton handed over his management to Teddy Hill, the saxophonist and former band leader, and Hill turned the Playhouse into a musical dueling ground. Not only did he continue Minton's policies, he expanded them. It was Hill who established the Monday Celebrity Nights, the house band which included such members from his own disbanded orchestra as Kenny Clarke, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonius Monk, sometimes Joe Guy, and later Charlie Christian and Charlie Parker, and it was Hill who allowed the musicians free rein to play whatever they liked. Perhaps no other club except Clarke Monroe's Uptown House was so permissive, and with the hospitality extended to musicians of all schools the news spread swiftly. Minton's became the focal point for musicians all over the country.

Herman Pritchard, who presided over the bar in the old days, tells us that every time they came, "Lester Young and Ben Webster used to tie up in battle like dogs in the road. They'd ght on those saxophones until they were tired out; then they'd put in long-distance calls to their mothers, both of whom lived in Kansas City, and tell them about it."

And most of the masters of jazz came either to observe or to participate and be in uenced and listen to their own discoveries transformed, and the aspiring stars sought to win their approval, as the younger tenor men tried to win the esteem of Coleman Hawkins.

Or they tried to vanquish them in jamming contests as Gillespie is said to have outblown his idol, Roy Eldridge. It was during this period that Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis underwent an ordeal of jeering rejection until nally he came through as an admired tenor man.

In the perspective of time we now see that what was happening at Minton’s was a continuing symposium of jazz, a summation of all

the styles, personal and traditional, of jazz. Here it was possible to hear its resources of technique, ideas, harmonic structure, melodic phrasing and rhythmical possibilities explored more thoroughly than was ever possible before. It was also possible to hear the rst attempts toward a conscious statement of the sensibility of the younger generation of musicians as they worked out the techniques, structures and rhythmical patterns with which to express themselves. Part of this was arbitrary, a revolt of the younger against the established stylists; part of it was inevitable. For jazz had reached a crisis, and new paths were certain to be searched for and found. An increasing number of the younger men were formally trained, and the post-Depression developments in the country had made for quite a break between their experience and that of the older men. Many were even of a di erent physical build. Often they were quiet and of a reserve which contrasted sharply with the exuberant and outgoing lyricism of the older men, and they were intensely concerned that their identity as Negroes place no restriction upon the music they played or the manner in which they used their talent. They were concerned, they said, with art, not entertainment. Especially were they resentful of Louis Armstrong, whom (confusing the spirit of his music with his clowning) they considered an Uncle Tom.

But they too, some of them, had their own myths and misconceptions: that theirs was the only generation of Negro musicians who listened to or enjoyed the classics; that to be truly free they must act exactly the opposite of what white people might believe, rightly or wrongly, a Negro to be; that the performing artist can be completely and absolutely free of the obligations of the entertainer, and that they could play jazz with dignity only by frowning and treating the audience with aggressive contempt; and that to be in control, artistically and personally, one must be so cool as to quench one’s own human re.

Nor should we overlook the despair which must have swept Minton’s before the technical mastery, the tonal authenticity, the authority and the fecundity of imagination of such men as Hawkins,

Young, Goodman, Tatum, Teagarden, Ellington and Waller. Despair, after all, is ever an important force in revolutions.

They were also responding to the nonmusical pressures a ecting jazz. It was a time of big bands, and the greatest prestige and economic returns were falling outside the Negro community—often to leaders whose popularity grew from the compositions and arrangements of Negroes—to white instrumentalists whose only originality lay in the enterprise with which they rushed to market with some Negro musician's hard-won style. Still there was no policy of racial discrimination at Minton's. Indeed, it was very much like those Negro cabarets of the twenties and thirties in which a megaphone was placed on the piano so that anyone with the urge could sing a blues. Nevertheless, the inside-dopesters will tell you that the "changes" or chord progressions and melodic inversions worked out by the creators of bop sprang partially from their desire to create a jazz which could not be so easily imitated and exploited by white musicians to whom the market was more open simply *because* of their whiteness. They wished to receive credit for what they created; besides, it was easier to "get rid of the trash" who crowded the bandstand with inept playing and thus make room for the real musicians, whether white or black. Nevertheless, white musicians like Tony Scott, Remo Palmieri and Al Haig who were part of the development at Minton's became so by passing a test of musicianship, sincerity and temperament. Later, it is said, the boppers became engrossed in solving the musical problems which they set themselves. Except for a few sympathetic older musicians, it was they who best knew the promise of the Minton moment, and it was they, caught like the rest in all the complex forces of American life which comes to focus in jazz, who made the most of it. Now the tall tales told as history must feed on the results of their e orts.

From *Esquire*, January 1959.

As the Spirit Moves Mahalia

THERE are certain women singers who possess, beyond all the boundaries of our admiration for their art, an uncanny power to evoke our love. We warm with pleasure at mere mention of their names; their simplest songs sing in our hearts like the remembered voices of old dear friends, and when we are lost within the listening anonymity of darkened concert halls, they

seem to seek us out unerringly. Standing regal within the bright isolation of the stage, their subtlest e ects seem meant for us and us alone: privately, as across the intimate space of our own living rooms. And when we encounter the simple dignity of their immediate presence, we suddenly ponder the mystery of human greatness.

Perhaps this power springs from their dedication, their having subjected themselves successfully to the demanding discipline necessary to the mastery of their chosen art. Or perhaps it is a quality with which they are born, as some are born with bright orange hair. Perhaps, though we think not, it is acquired, a technique of “presence.” But whatever its source, it touches us as a rich abundance of human warmth and sympathy. Indeed, we feel that if the idea of aristocracy is more than mere class conceit, then these surely are our natural queens. For they enchant the eye as they caress the ear, and in their presence we sense the full, moony glory of womanhood in all its mystery—maid, matron and matriarch. They are the sincere ones whose humanity dominates the arti ces of the art with which they stir us, and when they sing we have some notion of our better selves.

Lotte Lehmann is one of these, and Marian Anderson. Both Madame Ernestine Schumann-Heink and Kathleen Ferrier possessed it. Nor is it limited to these mistresses of high art. Pastoría Pavón,

“La Niña de Los Peines,” the great amenco singer, is another, and so is Mahalia Jackson, the subject of this piece, who reminds us that

while not all great singers possess this quality, those who do, no matter how obscure their origin, are soon claimed by the world as its own.

Mahalia Jackson, a large, handsome brown-skinned woman in her middle forties, who began singing in her father’s church at the age of ve, is a Negro of the *American* Negroes, and is, as the Spanish say, a woman of much quality. Her early experience was typical of Negro women of a certain class in the South. Born in New Orleans, she left school in the eighth grade and went to work as a nursemaid.

Later she worked in the cotton elds of Louisiana and as a domestic.

Her main social life was centered in the Baptist church. She grew up with the sound of jazz in her ears, and, being an admirer of Bessie Smith, was aware of the prizes and acclaim awaiting any mistress of the blues, but in her religious views the blues and jazz are profane forms and a temptation to be resisted. She also knew something of the painful experiences which go into the forging of a true singer of the blues.

In 1927, following the classical pattern of Negro migration, Mahalia went to Chicago, where she worked as a laundress and studied beauty culture. Here, too, her social and artistic life was in the Negro community, centered in the Greater Salem Baptist Church. Here she became a member of the choir and a soloist with a quintet which toured the churches a liated with the National Baptist Convention. Up until the forties she operated within a world of music which was con ned, for the most part, to Negro communities, and it was by her ability to move such audiences as are found here that her reputation grew. It was also such audiences which, by purchasing over two million copies of her famous “Move On Up a Little Higher,” brought her to national attention.

When listening to such recordings as *Sweet Little Jesus Boy*, *Bless This House*, *Mahalia Jackson*, or *In the Upper Room*, it is impossible to escape the fact that Mahalia Jackson is possessed of a profound religious conviction. Nor can we escape the awareness that no singer living has a greater ability to move us, regardless of our own

religious attitudes, with the projected emotion of a song. Perhaps with the interpretive artist the distinction so often made between popular and serious art is not so great as it seems. Perhaps what counts is the personal quality of the individual artist, the depth of his experience and his sense of life. Certainly Miss Jackson possesses a quality of dignity and the ability to project a sincerity of purpose which is characteristic of only the greatest of interpretive artists.

Nor should it be assumed that her singing is simply the expression of the Negro’s “natural” ability as is held by the stereotype (would that it were only true!). For although its techniques are not taught formally, Miss Jackson is the master of an art of singing which is as complex and of an even older origin than that of jazz.

It is an art which was acquired during those years when she sang in the comparative obscurity of the Negro community, and which, with the inevitable dilutions, comes into our national song style usually through the singers of jazz and the blues. It is an art which depends upon the employment of the full expressive resources of the human voice—from the rough growls employed by blues singers, the intermediate sounds, half-cry, half-recitative, which are common to Eastern music, the shouts and hollers of American Negro folk cries, the rough-edged tones and broad vibratos, the high, shrill and grating tones which rasp one's ears like the agonized ourishes of amenco, to the gut tones, which remind us of where the jazz trombone found its human source. It is an art which employs a broad rhythmic freedom and accents the lyric line to reinforce the emotional impact. It utilizes half-tones, glissandi, blue notes, humming and moaning. Or again, it calls upon the most lyrical, oating tones of which the voice is capable. Its diction ranges from the most precise to the near liquidation of word-meaning in the sound: a pronunciation which is almost of the academy one instant and of the broadest cotton-eld dialect the next. And it is most eclectic in its use of other musical idiom; indeed, it borrows any e ect which will aid in the arousing and control of emotion.

Especially is it free in its use of the e ects of jazz; its tempos (with the characteristic economy of Negro expression, it shares a common rhythmic and harmonic base with jazz) are taken along with its

intonations, and, in ensemble singing, its orchestral voicing. In Mahalia's own "Move On Up a Little Higher" there is a ri straight out of early Ellington. Most of all it is an art which swings, and in the South there are many crudely trained groups who use it naturally for the expression of religious feeling who could teach the jazz modernists quite a bit about polyrhythmics and polytonality.

Since the forties this type of vocal music, known loosely as

"gospel singing," has become a big business, both within the Negro community and without. Negro producers have found it highly pro table to hold contests in which groups of gospel singers are pitted against one another, and the radio stations which cater to the Negro market give many hours of their air time to this music. Today there are groups who follow

regular circuits just as the old Negro jazzmen, blues singers and vaudeville acts followed the old T.O.B.A.

circuit through the Negro communities of the nation. Some form the troupes of traveling evangelists and move about the country with their organs, tambourines, bones and drums. Some are led by ex-jazzmen who have put on the cloth, either sincerely or in response to the steady employment and growing market. So popular has the music become that there is a growing tendency to exploit its generic relationship to jazz and so-called rock-and-roll.

Indeed, many who come upon it outside the context of the Negro community tend to think of it as just another form of jazz, and the same confusion is carried over to the art of Mahalia Jackson. There is a widely held belief that she is really a blues singer who refuses, out of religious superstitions, perhaps, to sing the blues, a jazz singer who coyly rejects her rightful place before a swinging band.

And it *is* ironically true that just as a visitor who comes to Harlem seeking out many of the theaters and movie houses of the twenties will nd them converted into churches, those who seek today for a living idea of the rich and moving art of Bessie Smith must go not to the night clubs and variety houses where those who call themselves blues singers nd their existence, but must seek out Mahalia Jackson in a Negro church. And I insist upon the church and not the concert hall, because for all her concert appearances about the world she is not primarily a concert singer but a high priestess in

the religious ceremony of her church. As such she is as far from the secular existentialism of the blues as Sartre is from St. John of the Cross. And it is in the setting of the church that the full timbre of her sincerity sounds most distinctly.

Certainly there was good evidence of this last July at the Newport Jazz Festival, where one of the most widely anticipated events was Miss Jackson’s appearance with the Ellington Orchestra. Ellington had supplied the “Come Sunday” movement of his *Black, Brown and Beige Suite* (which with its organ-like close had contained one of Johnny Hodges’s most serenely moving solos, a superb evocation of Sunday peace) with lyrics for

Mahalia to sing. To make way for her, three of the original movements were abandoned, along with the Hodges solo, but in their place she was given words of such banality that for all the fervor of her singing and the band's excellent performance, that Sunday sun simply would not arise. Nor does the recorded version change our opinion that this was a most unfortunate marriage and an error of taste, and the rather unformed setting of the Twenty-third Psalm which completes the side does nothing to improve things. In fact, only the sound and certain of the transitions between movements are an improvement over the old version of the suite. Originally "Come Sunday" was Ellington's moving *impression* of Sunday peace and religious quiet, but he got little of this into the words. So little, in fact, that it was impossible for Mahalia to release that vast fund of emotion with which Southern Negroes have charged the scenes and symbols of the Gospels.

Only the fortunate few who braved the Sunday-morning rain to attend the Afro-American Episcopal Church services heard Mahalia at her best at Newport. Many had doubtless been absent from church or synagogue for years, but here they saw her in her proper setting and the venture into the strangeness of the Negro church was worth the visit. Here they could see, to the extent we can visualize such a thing, the world which Mahalia summons up with her voice, the spiritual reality which infuses her song. Here it could be seen that the true function of her singing is not simply to entertain, but to prepare the congregation for the minister's message, to make it

receptive to the spirit, and with e ects of voice and rhythm to evoke a shared community of experience.

As she herself put it while complaining of the length of the time allowed her during a recording session, "I'm used to singing in church, where they don't stop me until the Lord comes." By which she meant, not until she had created the spiritual and emotional climate in which the Word is made manifest; not until, and as the spirit moves her, the song of Mahalia the high priestess sings within the heart of the congregation as its own voice of faith.

When in possession of the words which embody her religious convictions, Mahalia can dominate even the strongest jazz beat and instill it with her own fervor. *Bless This House* contains songs set to rumba, waltz and two-

step, but what she does to them provides a triumphal blending of popular dance movements with religious passion. In *Sweet Little Jesus Boy*, the song “The Holy Babe” is a Negro version of an old English count-rhyme, and while enumerating the gifts of the Christian God to man, Mahalia and Mildred Falls, her pianist, create a rhythmical drive such as is expected of the entire Basie band. It is all joy and exultation and swing, but it is nonetheless religious music. Many who are moved by Mahalia and her spirit have been so impressed by the emotional release of her music that they fail to see the frame within which she moves. But even *In the Upper Room* and *Mahalia Jackson*—in which she reminds us most poignantly of Bessie Smith, and in which the common singing techniques of the spirituals and the blues are most clearly to be heard—are directed toward the afterlife and thus are intensely religious. For those who cannot, or will not, visit Mahalia in her proper setting, these records are the next best thing.

From *Saturday Review*, September 27, 1958.

On Bird, Bird-Watching and Jazz *BIRD: The Legend of Charlie Parker,* a collection of anecdotes, testimonies and descriptions of the life of the famous jazz saxophonist, may be described as an attempt to de ne just what species of bird Bird really was. Introduced by Robert Reisner’s description of his own turbulent friendship and business relations with Parker, it presents contributions by some eighty-three fellow Bird watchers, including a wife and his mother, Mrs. Addie Parker.

There are also poems, photographs, descriptions of his funeral, memorial and estate, a chronology of his life, and an extensive discography by Erik Wiedemann.

One of the founders of postwar jazz, Parker had, as an improviser, as marked an in uence upon jazz as Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins or Johnny Hodges. He was also famous for his riotous living, which, heightened by alcohol and drugs, led many of his admirers to consider him a latter-day François Villon. Between the beginning of his fame in about 1945 and his death in 1955, he became the central gure of a cult which glori ed in his escapades no less than in his music. The present volume is mainly concerned with the escapades, the circumstances behind them and their e ect upon Bird’s friends and family.

Oddly enough, while several explanations are advanced as to how Charles Parker, Jr., became known as “Bird” (“Yardbird,” in an earlier metamorphosis), none is conclusive. There is, however, overpowering internal evidence that whatever the true circumstance of his ornithological designation, it had little to do with the chicken yard. Randy roosters and operatic hens are familiars to fans of the animated cartoons, but for all the pathetic comedy of his living—

and despite the crabbed and constricted character of his style—

Parker was a most inventive melodist, in bird-watcher’s terminology, a true songster.

This failure in the exposition of Bird’s legend is intriguing, for nicknames are indicative of a change from a given to an achieved identity, whether by rise or fall, and they tell us something of the nicknamed individual’s interaction with his fellows. Thus, since we suspect that more of legend is involved in his renaming than Mr.

Reisner’s title indicates, let us at least consult Roger Tory Peterson’s *Field Guide to the Birds* for a hint as to why, during a period when most jazzmen were labeled “cats,” someone hung the bird on Charlie. Let us note too that “legend” originally meant “the story of a saint,” and that saints were often identi ed with symbolic animals.

Two species won our immediate attention, the gold nch and the mockingbird—the gold nch because the beatnik phrase “Bird lives,”

which, following Parker’s death, has been chalked endlessly on Village buildings and subway walls, reminds us that during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries a symbolic gold nch frequently appeared in European devotional paintings. An apocryphal story has it that upon being given a clay bird for a toy, the infant Jesus brought it miraculously to life as a gold nch. Thus the small, tawny-brown bird with a bright red patch about the base of its bill and a broad yellow band across its wings became a representative of the soul, the Passion and the Sacri ce. In more worldly late-Renaissance art, the little bird became the ambiguous symbol of death and the soul’s immortality. For our own purposes, however, its song poses a

major problem: it is like that of a canary—which, soul or no soul, rules the gold nch out.

The mockingbird, *Mimus polyglottos*, is more promising. Peterson informs us that its song consists of "long successions of notes and phrases of great variety, with each phrase repeated a half-dozen times before going on to the next," that mockingbirds are "excellent mimics" who "adeptly imitate a score or more species found in the neighborhood," and that they frequently sing at night—a description which not only comes close to Parker's way with a saxophone but even hints at a trait of his character. For although he *usually* sang at night, his playing was characterized by velocity, by long-continued successions of notes and phrases, by swoops, bleats, echoes, rapidly repeated bebops—I mean rebopped bebops—by mocking mimicry of

other jazzmen's styles, and by interpolations of motifs from extraneous melodies, all of which added up to a dazzling display of wit, satire, burlesque and pathos. Further, he was as expert at issuing his improvisations from the dense brush as from the extreme treetops of the harmonic landscape, and there was, without doubt, as irrepressible a mockery in his personal conduct as in his music.

Mimic thrushes, which include the catbird and brown thrasher, along with the mockingbird, are not only great virtuosi, they are the tricksters and con men of the bird world. Like Parker, who is described as a con dence man and a practical joker by several of the commentators, they take o on the songs of other birds, in ating, inverting and turning them wrong side out, and are capable of driving a prowling ("square") cat wild. Utterly irreverent and romantic, they are not beyond bugging human beings. Indeed, on summer nights in the South, when the moon hangs low, mockingbirds sing as though determined to heat every drop of romance in the sleeping adolescent's heart to fever pitch. Their song thrills and swings the entire moon-struck night to arouse one's sense of the mystery, promise and frustration of being human, alive and hot in the blood. They are as delightful to eye as to ear, but sometimes a similarity of voice and appearance makes for a confusion with the shrike, a species given to

impaling insects and smaller songbirds on the points of thorns, and they are destroyed.

They are fond of fruit, especially mulberries, and if there is a tree in your yard, there will be, along with the wonderful music, much chalky, blue-tinted evidence of their presence. Under such conditions, be careful and heed Parker's warning to his friends—

who sometimes were subjected to a shrikelike treatment—"you must pay your dues to Bird."

Though notes of bitterness sound through Mr. Reisner's book, he and his friends paid willingly for the delight and frustration which Parker brought into their lives. Thus their comments—which are quite unreliable as history—constitute less a collective biography than a celebration of his living and a lamentation of his dying, and are, in the ritual sense, his apotheosis or epiphany into the glory of those who have been reborn in legend.

Symbolic birds, myth and ritual—what strange metaphors to arise during the discussion of a book about a jazz musician! And yet who knows very much of what jazz is really about? Or how shall we ever know until we are willing to confront anything and everything which it sweeps across our path? Consider that at least as early as T.

S. Eliot's creation of a new aesthetic for poetry through the artful juxtapositioning of earlier styles, Louis Armstrong, way down the river in New Orleans, was working out a similar technique for jazz.

This is not a matter of giving the music ne airs—it doesn't need them—but of saying that whatever touches our highly conscious creators of culture is apt to be re ected here.

The thrust toward respectability exhibited by the Negro jazzmen of Parker's generation drew much of its immediate re from their understandable rejection of the traditional entertainer's role—a heritage from the minstrel tradition—exempli ed by such an outstanding creative musician as Louis Armstrong. But when they fastened the epithet "Uncle Tom" upon Armstrong's music they confused artistic quality with questions of personal

conduct, a confusion which would ultimately reduce their own music to the mere matter of race. By rejecting Armstrong they thought to rid themselves of the entertainer's role. And by way of getting rid of the role, they demanded, in the name of their racial identity, a purity of status which by de nition is impossible for the performing artist.

The result was a grim comedy of racial manners, with the musicians employing a calculated surliness and rudeness, treating the audience very much as many white merchants in poor Negro neighborhoods treat their customers, and the white audiences were shocked at rst but learned quickly to accept such treatment as evidence of "artistic" temperament. Then comes a comic reversal.

Today the white audience expects the rudeness as part of the entertainment. If it fails to appear, the audience is disappointed. For the jazzmen it has become a proposition of the more you win, the more you lose. Certain older jazzmen possessed a clearer idea of the division between their identities as performers and as private individuals. O stage and while playing in ensemble, they carried themselves like college professors or high church deacons; when

soloing they donned the comic mask and went into frenzied pantomimes of hotness—even when playing "cool"—and when done, dropped the mask and returned to their chairs with dignity.

Perhaps they realized that whatever his style, the performing artist remains an entertainer, even as Heifetz, Rubinstein or young Glenn Gould.

For all the revolutionary ardor of his style, Dizzy Gillespie, a co-founder with Parker of modern jazz and a man with a savage eye for the incongruous, is no less a clown than Louis, and his wide reputation rests as much upon his entertaining personality as upon his gifted musicianship. There is even a morbid entertainment value in watching the funereal posturing of the Modern Jazz Quartet, and doubtless part of the tension created in their listeners arises from the anticipation that during some unguarded moment, the grinning visage of the traditional delight-maker (inferior because performing at the audience's command, superior because he can perform e ectively through the magic of his art) will emerge from

behind those bearded masks. In the United States, where each of us is a member of some minority group and where political power and entertainment alike are derived from viewing and manipulating the human predicaments of others, the maintenance of dignity is never a simple matter, even for those with highest credentials. Gossip is one of our largest industries, the President is fair game for caricaturists, and there is always someone around to set a symbolic midget upon J. P. Morgan's unwilling knee.

No jazzman, not even Miles Davis, struggled harder to escape the entertainer's role than Charlie Parker. The pathos of his life lies in the ironic reversal through which his struggles to escape what in Armstrong is basically a *make-believe* role of clown—which the irreverent poetry and triumphant sound of his trumpet makes even the squarest of squares aware of—resulted in Parker's becoming something far more "primitive": a sacri cial gure whose struggles against personal chaos, onstage and o , served as entertainment for a ravenous, sensation-starved, culturally disoriented public which

had only the slightest notion of its real signi cance. While he slowly died (like a man dismembering himself with a dull razor on a spotlighted stage) from the ceaseless con ict from which issued both his art and his destruction, his public reacted as though he were doing much the same thing as those saxophonists who hoot and honk and roll on the oor. In the end he had no private life and his most tragic moments were drained of human signi cance.

Here, perhaps, is an explanation, beyond all questions of reason, drugs or whiskey, of the violent contradictions detailed in Mr.

Reisner's book of Parker's public conduct. In attempting to escape the role, at once sub-and superhuman, in which he found himself, he sought to outrage his public into an awareness of his most human pain. Instead, he made himself notorious, and in the end became unsure whether his fans came to enjoy his art or to be entertained by the "world's greatest junky," the "supreme hipster." Sensitive and thoroughly aware of the terrifying cost of his art and his public image, he had to bear not only the dismemberment occasioned by rival musicians who imitated every nuance of his style—

often with far greater nancial return—but the imitation of his every self-destructive excess of personal conduct by those who had in no sense earned the right of such license. Worse, it was these who formed his cult.

Parker operated in the underworld of American culture, on that turbulent level where human instincts con ict with social institutions, where contemporary civilized values and hypocrisies are challenged by the Dionysian urges of a between-wars youth born to prosperity, conditioned by the threat of world destruction, and inspired—when not seeking total anarchy—by a need to bring social reality and our social pretensions into a more meaningful balance.

Signi cantly enough, race is an active factor here, though not in the usual sense. When the jazz drummer Art Blakey was asked about Parker's meaning for Negroes, he replied, "They never heard of him." Parker's artistic success and highly publicized death have changed all that today, but interestingly enough, Bird was indeed a

"white" hero. His greatest signi cance was for the educated white

middle-class youth whose reactions to the inconsistencies of American life was the stance of casting o its education, language, dress, manners and moral standards: a revolt, apolitical in nature, which nds its most dramatic instance in the gure of the so-called white hipster. And whatever its justi cation, it was, and is, a reaction to the chaos which many youth sense at the center of our society.

For the postwar jazznik, Parker was Bird, a su ering, psychically wounded, lawbreaking, life-a rming hero. For them he possessed something of the aura of that gure common to certain contemporary novels which R.W.B. Lewis describes as the

"picaresque saint." He was an obsessed outsider—and Bird was thrice alienated: as Negro, as addict, as exponent of a new and disturbing development in jazz—whose tortured and in many ways criminal striving for personal and moral integration invokes a sense of tragic fellowship in those who saw in his agony a ritualization of their own fears, rebellions and hunger for creativity. One of the most signi cant features of Reisner's book

lies, then, in his subtitle, even though he prefers to participate in the recreation of Bird’s legend rather than perform the critical function of analyzing it.

Reisner, a former art historian who chooses to write in the barely articulate jargon of the hipster, no more than hints at this (though Ted Joans spins it out in a wild surrealist poem). But when we read through the gossip of the accounts we recognize the presence of a modern American version of the ancient myth of the birth and death of the hero. We are told of his birth, his early discovery of his vocation, his dedication to his art, of his wanderings and early defeats; we are told of his initiation into the mysteries revealed by his drug and the regions of terror to which it conveyed him; we are told of his obsessive identi cation with his art and his moment of revelation and metamorphosis. Here is Parker’s own version: I remember one night I was jamming in a chili house (Dan Wall’s) on Seventh Avenue between 139th and 140th. It was December, 1939 … I’d been getting bored with the stereotyped changes that were being used all the time, all the time, and I kept thinking there’s bound to be something else. I could hear it

sometimes but I couldn’t play it. Well, that night, I was working over

“Cherokee,” and, as I did, I found that by using the higher intervals of a chord as a melody line and backing them with appropriately related changes, I could play the thing I’d been hearing. I came alive.

From then on he reigns as a recognized master, creating, recording, inspiring others, nding fame, beginning a family. Then comes his waning, su ering, disintegration and death.

Many of the bare facts of Parker’s life are presented in the useful chronology, but it is the individual commentator’s embellishments on the facts which create the mythic dimension. Bird was a most gifted innovator and evidently a most ingratiating and di cult man

—one whose friends had no need for an enemy, and whose enemies had no di culty in justifying their hate. According to his witnesses, he stretched the limits of human contradiction beyond belief. He was lovable and hateful, considerate and callous; he stole from friends and benefactors and borrowed

without conscience, often without repaying, and yet was generous to absurdity. He could be most kind to younger musicians or utterly crushing in his contempt for their ineptitude. He was passive and yet quick to pull a knife and pick a ght. He knew the di culties which are often the lot of jazz musicians, but as a leader he tried to con his sidemen out of their wages. He evidently loved the idea of having a family and being a good father and provider, but found it as di cult as being a good son to his devoted mother. He was given to extremes of sadism and masochism, capable of the most staggering excesses and the most exacting physical discipline and assertion of will. Indeed, one gets the image of such a character as Stavrogin in Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, who while many things to many people seemed essentially devoid of a human center—except, and an important exception indeed, Parker was an artist who found his moments of sustained and meaningful integration through the reed and keys of the alto saxophone. It is the recordings of his ights of music which remain, and it is these which form the true substance of his myth.

Which brings us, nally, to a few words about Parker's style. For all its velocity, brilliance and imagination there is in it a great deal

of loneliness, self-depreciation and self-pity. With this there is a quality which seems to issue from its vibratoless tone: a sound of amateurish ine ectuality, as though he could never quite make it. It is this amateurish-sounding aspect which promises so much to the members of a do-it-yourself culture; it sounds with an assurance that you too can create your own do-it-yourself jazz. Dream stu , of course, but there is a relationship between the Parker *sound* and the impossible genre of teen-age music which has developed since his death. Nevertheless he captured something of the discordancies, the yearning, romance and cunning of the age and ordered it into a haunting art. He was not the god they see in him, but for once the beatniks are correct: Bird lives, perhaps because his tradition and his art blew him to the meaningful center of things.

But what kind of bird was Parker? Back during the thirties members of the old Blue Devils Orchestra celebrated a certain robin by playing a lugubrious little tune called "They Picked Poor Robin."

It was a jazz-community joke, musically an extended “signifying ri ” or melodic naming of a recurring human situation, and was played to satirize some betrayal of faith or loss of love observed from the bandstand. Sometimes it was played as the purple-fezzed musicians returned from the burial of an Elk, whereupon reaching the Negro business and entertainment district the late Walter Page would announce the melody dolefully on his tuba; then poor robin would transport the mourners from their somber mood to the spirit-lifting beat of ’Oh, didn’t he ramble” or some other happy tune.

Parker, who studied with Buster Smith and jammed with other members of the disbanded Devils in Kansas City, might well have known the verse which Walter Page supplied to the tune: *Oh, they picked poor robin clean (repeat)*

They tied poor robin to a stump

Lord, they picked all the feathers

Round from robin’s rump

Oh, they picked poor robin clean.

Poor robin was picked again and again, and his pluckers were ever unnamed and mysterious. Yet the tune was inevitably productive of laughter even when we ourselves were its object. For each of us recognized that his fate was somehow our own. Our defeats and failures, even our nal defeat by death, were loaded upon his back and given ironic signi cance and thus made more bearable. Perhaps Charlie was poor robin come to New York and here to be sacri ced to the need for entertainment and for the creation of a new jazz style, and awaits even now in death a meaning-making plucking by perceptive critics. The e ectiveness of any sacri ce depends upon our identi cation with the agony of the hero-victim; to those who would still insist that Charlie was a mere yardbird, our reply can only be, “Aint nobody *here* but us chickens, boss!”

From *Saturday Review*, July 28, 1962.

The Charlie Christian Story

JAZZ, like the country which gave it birth, is fecund in its inventiveness, swift and traumatic in its developments and terribly wasteful of its resources. It is an orgiastic art which demands great physical stamina of its practitioners, and many of its most talented creators die young. More often than not (and this is especially true of its Negro exponents) its heroes remain local gures known only to small-town dance halls, and whose reputations are limited to the radius of a few hundred miles.

A case in point, and a compelling argument for closer study of roots and causes, is a recording devoted to the art of Charlie Christian, probably the greatest of jazz guitarists. He died in 1942

after a brief, spectacular career with the Benny Goodman Sextet.

Had he not come from Oklahoma City in 1939 at the instigation of John Hammond, he might have shared the fate of many we knew in the period when Christian was growing up (and I doubt that it has changed very much today).

Some of the most brilliant of jazzmen made no records; their names appeared in print only in announcements of some local dance or remote "battles of music" against equally uncelebrated bands.

Being devoted to an art which traditionally thrives on improvisation, these unrecorded artists very often have their most original ideas enter the public domain almost as rapidly as they are conceived, to be quickly absorbed into the thought and technique of their fellows. Thus the ri s which swung the dancers and the band on some transcendent evening, and which inspired others to competitive ights of invention, become all too swiftly a part of the general style, leaving the originator as anonymous as the creators of the architecture called Gothic.

There is in this a cruel contradiction implicit in the art form itself, for true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the

group. Each true jazz moment (as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance) springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo ight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive

canvases of a painter) a de nition of his identity as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz nds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he nds it; how often do we see even the most famous of jazz artists being devoured alive by their imitators, and, shamelessly, in the public spotlight?

So at best the musical contributions of these local, unrecorded heroes of jazz are enjoyed by a few fellow musicians and by a few dancers who admire them and a ord them the meager economic return which allows them to keep playing. But often they live beyond the period of youthful dedication, hoping in vain that some visiting big-band leader will provide the opportunity to break through to the wider spheres of jazz. Indeed, to escape these fates the artists must be very talented, very individual, as restlessly inventive as Picasso, and very lucky.

Charles Christian, when Hammond brought him to the attention of Goodman, had been for most of his life just such a local jazz hero.

Nor do I use the term loosely, for having known him since 1923, when he and my younger brother were members of the same rst-grade class, I can recall no time when he was not admired for his skillful playing of stringed instruments. Indeed, a great part of his time in the manual-training department of Douglass School was spent constructing guitars from cigar boxes, instruments upon which both he and his older brother, Clarence, were dazzlingly adept.

Incidentally, in their excellent notes to the album Al Avakian and Bob Prince are mistaken when they assume that Christian was innocent of contact with musical forms more sophisticated than the blues, and it would be well that here I o er a correction. Before Charlie was big enough to handle a guitar himself he served as a guide for his father, a blind guitarist and singer. Later he joined with his father, his brothers Clarence and Edward (an arranger, pianist, violinist and performer on the string bass and tuba), and

made his contribution to the family income by strolling with them through the white middle-class sections of Oklahoma City, where they played

serenades on request. Their repertory included the light classics as well as the blues, and there was no doubt in the minds of those who heard them that the musical value they gave was worth far more than the money they received. Later on Edward, who took leading roles in the standard operettas performed by members of the high-school chorus, led his own band and played gigs from time to time with such musicians as “Hot Lips” Page, Walter Page, Sammy Price and Lem C. Johnson (to mention a few), all members at some point of the Blue Devils Orchestra, which later merged with the Benny Moten group to become the famous Count Basie Band. I need only mention that Oklahoma City was a regular stopping point for Kansas City-based orchestras, or that a number of the local musicians were conservatory-trained and were capable of sight-reading the hodgepodge scores which during the “million-dollar production” stage of the silent movies were furnished to the stands of pit orchestras.

The facts in these matters are always more intriguing than the legends. In the school which we attended, harmony was taught from the ninth through the twelfth grades; there was an extensive and compulsory music-appreciation program, and, though Charles was never a member, a concert band and orchestra and several vocal organizations. In brief, both in his home and in the community Charles Christian was subjected to many diverse musical in uences.

It was the era of radio, and for a while a local newspaper gave away cheap plastic recordings of such orchestras as Jean Goldkette’s, along with subscriptions. The big media of communication were active for better or worse even then, and the Negro community was never completely isolated from their in uence.

However, perhaps the most stimulating in uence upon Christian, and one with whom he was later to be identi ed, was that of a tall, intense young musician who arrived in Oklahoma City sometime in 1929 and who, with his heavy white sweater, blue stocking cap and up-and-outthrust silver saxophone, left absolutely no reed player and few young players of any instrument unstirred by the wild,

excitingly original ights of his imagination. Who else but Lester Young, who with his battered horn upset the entire Negro section of the town? One

of our friends gave up his valved instrument for the tenor saxophone and soon ran away from home to carry the new message to Baltimore, while a good part of the e orts of the rest was spent trying to absorb and transform the Youngian style.

Indeed, only one other young musician created anything like the excitement attending Young's stay in the town. This was Carlton George, who had played with Earl Hines and whose trumpet style was shaped after the excursions of Hines's right hand. He, however, was a minor in uence, having arrived during the national ascendancy of Louis Armstrong and during the local reign of Oran ("Hot Lips") Page.

When we consider the stylistic development of Charles Christian we are reminded how little we actually know of the origins of even the most recent of jazz styles, or of when and where they actually started, or of the tensions, personal, sociological or technical, out of which such an original artist achieves his stylistic identity. For while there is now a rather extensive history of discography and recording sessions, there is but the bare beginnings of a historiography of jazz.

We know much of jazz as entertainment, but a mere handful of clichés constitutes our knowledge of jazz as experience. Worse, it is this which is frequently taken for all there is, and we get the impression that jazz styles are created in some club on some particular occasion, and there and then codi ed according to the preconceptions of the jazz publicists in an atmosphere as grave and traditional, say, as that attending the deliberations of the Académie Française. It is this which leads to the notion that jazz was invented in a particular house of ill fame by "Jelly Roll" Morton, who admitted the crime himself; that swing was invented by Goodman in about 1935; and that T. Monk, K. Clarke and J. B. "D" Gillespie invented "progressive" jazz at Minton's Playhouse in Harlem about 1941.

This is, of course, convenient but only relatively true, and the e ort to let the history of jazz as entertainment stand for the whole of jazz ignores the most fundamental knowledge of the dynamics of

stylistic growth which has been acquired from studies in other branches of music and from our knowledge of the growth of other art forms. The jazz

artist who becomes nationally known is written about as though he came into existence only upon his arrival in New York. His career in the big cities, where jazz is more of a commercial entertainment than part of a total way of life, is stressed at the expense of his life in the South, the Southwest and the Midwest, where most Negro musicians found their early development. Thus we are left with an impression of mysterious rootlessness, and the true and often annoying complexity of American cultural experience is oversimpli ed.

With jazz this has made for the phenomena of an art form existing in a curious state of history and pre-history simultaneously. Not that it isn't recognized that it is an art with deep roots in the past, but that the nature of its deep connection with social conditions here and now is slighted. Charlie Christian is a case in point. He owered from a background with roots not only in a tradition of music, but in a deep division in the Negro community as well. He spent much of his life in a slum in which all the forms of disintegration attending the urbanization of rural Negroes ran riot. Although he himself was from a respectable family, the wooden tenement in which he grew up was full of poverty, crime and sickness. It was also alive and exciting, and I enjoyed visiting there, for the people both lived and sang the blues. Nonetheless, it was doubtless here that he developed the tuberculosis from which he died.

More important, jazz was regarded by most of the respectable Negroes of the town as a backward, low-class form of expression, and there was a marked di erence between those who accepted and lived close to their folk experience and those whose status strivings led them to reject and deny it. Charlie rejected this attitude in turn, along with those who held it, even to the point of not participating in the musical activities of the school. Like Jimmy Rushing, whose father was a businessman and whose mother was active in church a airs, he had heard the voice of jazz and would hear no other.

Ironically, what was perhaps his greatest social triumph came in death, when the respectable Negro middle class not only joined in

the public mourning, but acclaimed him as a hero and took credit for his development. The attention which the sheer quality of his music should

have secured him was won only by his big-town success.

Fortunately for us, Charles concentrated on the guitar and left the school band to his brother Edward, and his decision was a major part of his luck. For although it is seldom recognized, there is a con ict between what the Negro American musician feels in the community around him and the given (or classical) techniques of his instrument. He feels a tension between his desire to master the classical style of playing and his compulsion to express those sounds which form a musical de nition of Negro American experience. In early jazz these sounds found their fullest expression in the timbre of the blues voice, and the use of mutes, water glasses and derbies on the bells of their horns arose out of an attempt to imitate this sound. Among the younger musicians of the thirties, especially those who contributed to the growth of bop, this desire to master the classical technique was linked with the struggle for recognition in the larger society, and with a desire to throw o those nonmusical features which came into jazz from the minstrel tradition. Actually, it was for this reason that Louis Armstrong (who is not only a great performing artist but a clown in the Elizabethan sense of the word) became their scapegoat. What was not always understood was that there were actually two separate bodies of instrumental technique: the one classic, widely recognized and “correct”; and the other eclectic, partly unconscious and “jazzy.” And it was the tension between these two bodies of technique which led to many of the technical discoveries of jazz. Further, we are now aware of the existence of a fully developed and endlessly exible technique of jazz expression, which has become quite independent of the social environment in which it developed, if not of its spirit.

Interestingly enough, the guitar (long regarded as a traditional instrument of Southern Negroes) was subjected to little of this con ict between techniques and ways of experiencing the world. Its role in the jazz orchestra was important but unobtrusive, and before Christian little had been done to explore its full potentialities for

jazz. Thus Christian was able to experiment with the least in uence from either traditional or contemporary sources. Starting long before he was aware of his mission—as would seem to be the way with important

innovators in the arts—he taught himself to voice the guitar as a solo instrument, a development made possible through the perfecting of the electronically ampli ed instrument, and the rest is history.

With Christian the guitar found its jazz voice. With his entry into jazz circles his musical intelligence was able to exert its in uence upon his peers and to a ect the course of the future development of jazz. This album of his work—so irresistible and danceable in its swing, so intellectually stimulating in its ideas—is important not only for its contribution to our knowledge of the evolution of contemporary jazz style; it also o ers one of the best arguments for bringing more serious critical intelligence to this branch of our national culture.

From *Saturday Review*, May 17, 1958.

Remembering Jimmy

IN the old days the voice was high and clear and poignantly lyrical.

Steel-bright in its upper range and, at its best, silky smooth, it was possessed of a purity somehow impervious to both the stress of singing above a twelve-piece band and the urgency of Rushing's own blazing fervor. On dance nights, when you stood on the rise of the school grounds two blocks to the east, you could hear it jetting from the dance hall like a blue ame in the dark, now soaring high above the trumpets and trombones, now skimming the froth of reeds and rhythm as it called some woman's anguished name—or demanded in a high, thin, passionately lyrical line, "Baaaaay-bay, Bay-aaaay-bay! Tell me what's the matter now!"—above the shouting of the swinging band.

Nor was there need for the by now famous signature line: "If anybody asks you who sang this song *Tell 'em* it was little Jimmy Rushing / he's been here and gone," for everyone on Oklahoma City's "East Side" knew that sweet, high-oating sound.

"Deep Second" was our fond nickname for the block in which Rushing worked and lived, and where most Negro business and entertainment were found, and before he went on to cheer a wider world his voice evoked the

festive spirit of the place. Indeed, he was the natural herald of its blues-romance, his song the singing essence of its joy. For Jimmy Rushing was not simply a local entertainer; he expressed a value, an attitude about the world for which our lives a orded no other de nition. We had a Negro church and a segregated school, a few lodges and fraternal organizations, and beyond these there was all the great white world. We were pushed o to what seemed to be the least desirable side of the city (but which some years later was found to contain one of the state's richest pools of oil), and our system of justice was based upon Texas law; yet there was an optimism within the Negro community and a

sense of possibility which, despite our awareness of limitation (dramatized so brutally in the Tulsa riot of 1921), transcended all of this, and it was this rock-bottom sense of reality, coupled with our sense of the possibility of rising above it, which sounded in Rushing's voice.

And how it carried! In those days I lived near the Rock Island roundhouse, where, with a steady clanging of bells and a great groaning of wheels along the rails, switch engines made up trains of freight unceasingly. Yet often in the late-spring night I could hear Rushing as I lay four blocks away in bed, carrying to me as clear as a full-bored ri on "Hot Lips" Paige's horn. Heard thus, across the dark blocks lined with locust trees, through the night throbbing with the natural aural imagery of the blues, with high-balling trains, departing bells, lonesome guitar chords simmering up from a shack in the alley, it was easy to imagine the voice as setting the pattern to which the instruments of the Blue Devils Orchestra and all the random sounds of night arose, a rming, as it were, some ideal native to the time and to the land. When we were still too young to attend night dances, but yet old enough to gather beneath the corner street-lamp on summer evenings, anyone might halt the conversation to exclaim, "Listen, they're raising hell down at Slaughter's Hall," and we'd turn our heads westward to hear Jimmy's voice soar up the hill and down, as pure and as miraculously unhindered by distance and earthbound things as is the body in youthful dreams of ying.

"Now, that's the Right Reverend Jimmy Rushing preaching now, man," someone would say. And rising to the cue another would answer, "Yeah,

and that's old Elder 'Hot Lips' signifying along with him, urging him on, man." And, keeping it building, "Huh, but though you can't hear him out this far, Ole Deacon Big-un [the late Walter Page] is up there patting his foot and slapping on his big belly [the bass viol] to keep those fools in line." And we might go on to name all the members of the band as though they were the Biblical four-and-twenty elders, while laughing at the impious wit of applying church titles to a form of music which all the preachers assured us was the devil's potent tool.

Our wit was true, for Jimmy Rushing, along with the other jazz musicians whom we knew, had made a choice, had dedicated himself to a mode of expression and a way of life no less

"righteously" than others dedicated themselves to the church. Jazz and the blues did not t into the scheme of things as spelled out by our two main institutions, the church and the school, but they gave expression to attitudes which found no place in these and helped to give our lives some semblance of wholeness. Jazz and the public jazz dance was a third institution in our lives, and a vital one, and though Jimmy was far from being a preacher, he was, as o cial oor manager or master-of-thedance at Slaughter's Hall, the leader of a public rite.

He was no Mr. Five-by- ve in those days, but a compact, debonair young man who dressed with an easy elegance. Much later, during theater appearances with Basie's famous band, he sometimes cut an old step from slavery days called "falling o the log" for the sheer humor provided by the rapid and apparently precarious shifting of his great bulk, but in the Oklahoma days he was capable of an amazing grace of movement. A nineteenth-century formality still clung to public dances at the time, and there was quite a variety of steps. Jimmy danced them all, gliding before the crowd over the polished oor, sometimes with a girl, sometimes with a huge megaphone held chest-high before him as he swayed. The evenings began with the more formal steps, to popular and semi-classical music, and proceeded to become more expressive as the spirit of jazz and the blues became dominant. It was when Jimmy's voice began to soar with the spirit of the blues that the dancers—and the musicians—achieved that feeling of communion which was the true meaning of the public jazz dance. The

blues, the singer, the band and the dancers formed the vital whole of jazz as an institutional form, and even today neither part is quite complete without the rest.

The thinness of much of so-called “modern jazz” is especially re ective of this loss of wholeness, and it is quite possible that Rushing retains his vitality simply because he has kept close to the small Negro public dance.

The occasion for this shamelessly nostalgic outburst is provided by a series of Rushing recordings issued over the past few years: Vanguard’s *Jazz Showcase;* Columbia’s *Goin’ to Chicago, Listen to the Blues with Jimmy Rushing, If This Ain’t the Blues, The Jazz Odyssey of James Rushing, Esq.* , and *Little Jimmy Rushing and the Big Brass*. An older recording, Decca’s *Kansas City Jazz,* contains Rushing’s best version of his classic “Good Morning Blues,” and o ers a vivid idea of the styles and combinations of musicians which made up the milieu in which Rushing found his early development. These discs form a valuable introduction to the art of Jimmy Rushing in all its fervor and variety.

Rushing is known today primarily as a blues singer, but not so in those days. He began as a singer of ballads, bringing to them a sincerity and a feeling for dramatizing the lyrics in the musical phrase which charged the banal lines with the mysterious potentiality of meaning which haunts the blues. And it was, perhaps, Rushing’s beginning as a ballad singer which gives his blues interpretations their special quality. For one of the signi cant aspects of his art is the imposition of a romantic lyricism upon the blues tradition (compare his version of “See See Rider” with that of Ma Rainey), a lyricism which is not of the Deep South, but of the Southwest: a romanticism native to the frontier, imposed upon the violent rawness of a part of the nation which only thirteen years before Rushing’s birth was still Indian territory. Thus there is an optimism in it which echoes the spirit of those Negroes who, like Rushing’s father, had come to Oklahoma in search of a more human way of life.

Rushing is one of the rst singers to sing the blues before a big band, and even today he seldom comes across as a blues “shouter,”

but maintains the lyricism which has always been his way with the blues. Indeed, when we listen to his handling of lyrics we become aware of that quality which makes for the mysteriousness of the blues: their ability to imply far more than they state outright, and their capacity to make the details of sex convey meanings which touch upon the metaphysical. For, indeed, they always nd poetry in the limits of the Negro vocabulary. Perhaps because he is more

educated and came from a family already well on its rise into what is called the “Negro middle class,” Jimmy has always shown a concern for the correctness of language, and out of the tension between the traditional folk pronunciation and his training in school, he has worked out a exibility of enunciation and a rhythmical agility with words which make us constantly aware of the meanings which shimmer just beyond the limits of the lyrics.

The blues is an art of ambiguity, an assertion of the irrepressibly human over all circumstance, whether created by others or by one’s own human failings. They are the only consistent art in the United States which constantly remind us of our limitations while encouraging us to see how far we can actually go. When understood in their more profound implication, they are a corrective, an attempt to draw a line upon man’s own limitless assertion.

Signi cantly, Jimmy Rushing was able to spread the appeal of the blues to a wider American audience after the Depression had made us a bit more circumspect about the human cost of living of our

“American way of life.” It seems especially tting now, when circumstance and its own position of leadership has forced the nation once more to examine its actions and its intentions, that the blues are once more becoming popular. There is great demand for Rushing in Europe, from which he has just returned with the Goodman band. And I think we need him more here at home.

Certainly this collection of discs will make us aware that there is emotional continuity in American life, and that the abiding moods expressed in our most vital popular art form are not simply a matter of entertainment; they also tell us who and where we are.

From *Saturday Review*, July 12, 1958.

Blues People

IN his introduction to *Blues People* LeRoi Jones advises us to approach the work as

…a strictly theoretical endeavor. Theoretical, in that none of the questions it poses can be said to have been answered de nitely or for all time (sic!), *etc.* In fact, the whole book proposes more questions than it will answer. The only questions it will properly move to answer have, I think, been answered already within the patterns of American life. We need only give these patterns serious scrutiny and draw certain permissible conclusions.

It is a useful warning and one hopes that it will be regarded by those jazz publicists who have the quite irresponsible habit of sweeping up any novel pronouncement written about jazz and slapping it upon the rst available record liner as the latest insight into the mysteries of American Negro expression.

Jones would take his subject seriously—as the best of jazz critics have always done—and he himself should be so taken. He has attempted to place the blues within the context of a total culture and to see this native art form through the disciplines of sociology, anthropology and (though he seriously underrates its importance in the creating of a viable theory) history, and he spells out explicitly his assumptions concerning the relation between the blues, the people who created them and the larger American culture. Although I nd several of his assumptions questionable, this is valuable in itself. It would be well if all jazz critics did likewise; not only would it expose those who have no business in the eld, but it would sharpen the thinking of the few who have something enlightening to contribute. *Blues People*, like much that is written by Negro Americans at the present moment, takes on an inevitable resonance from the Freedom Movement, but it is in itself characterized by a

straining for a note of militancy which is, to say the least, distracting. Its introductory mood of scholarly analysis frequently shatters into a dissonance of accusation, and one gets the impression that while Jones

wants to perform a crucial task which he feels *someone* should take on—as indeed someone should—he is frustrated by the restraint demanded of the critical pen and would like to pick up a club.

Perhaps this explains why Jones, who is also a poet and editor of a poetry magazine, gives little attention to the blues as lyric, as a form of poetry. He appears to be attracted to the blues for what he believes they tell us of the sociology of Negro American identity and attitude. Thus, after beginning with the circumstances in which he sees their origin, he considers the ultimate values of American society:

The Negro as slave is one thing. The Negro as American is quite another. But the *path* the slave took to "citizenship" is what I want to look at. And I make my analogy through the slave citizen's music—through the music that is most closely associated with him: blues and a later, but parallel, development, jazz.

And it seems to me that if the Negro represents, or is symbolic of, something in and about the nature of American culture, this certainly should be revealed by his characteristic music.… I am saying that if the music of the Negro in America, in all its permutations, is subjected to a socioanthropological as well as musical scrutiny, something about the essential nature of the Negro's existence in this country ought to be revealed, as well as something about the essential nature of this country, i.e., society as a whole.…

The tremendous burden of sociology which Jones would place upon this body of music is enough to give even the blues the blues.

At one point he tells us that "the one peculiar reference to the drastic change in the Negro from slavery to 'citizenship' is in his music." And later with more precision, he states:

…The point I want to make most evident here is that I cite the beginning of the blues as one beginning of American Negroes. Or, let me say, the reaction and subsequent relation of the Negro's experience in this country in *his* English is one beginning of the Negro's conscious appearance on the American scene.

No one could quarrel with Mr. Jones's stress upon beginnings. In 1833, two hundred and fourteen years after the rst Africans were brought to these shores as slaves, a certain Mrs. Lydia Maria Child, a leading member of the American Anti-Slavery Society, published a paper entitled: *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans*. I am uncertain to what extent it actually reveals Mrs.

Child's ideas concerning the complex relationship between time, place, cultural and/or national identity and race, but her title sounds like a ne bit of contemporary ironic *signifying*—"signifying"

here meaning, in the unwritten dictionary of American Negro usage,

"rhetorical understatements." It tells us much of the thinking of her opposition, and it reminds us that as late as the 1890s, a time when Negro composers, singers, dancers and comedians dominated the American musical stage, popular Negro songs (including James Weldon Johnson's "Under the Bamboo Tree," now immortalized by T. S. Eliot) were commonly referred to as "Ethiopian Airs."

Perhaps more than any other people, Americans have been locked in a deadly struggle with time, with history. We've ed the past and trained ourselves to suppress, if not forget, troublesome details of the national memory, and a great part of our optimism, like our progress, has been bought at the cost of ignoring the processes through which we've arrived at any given moment in our national existence. We've fought continuously with one another over who and what we are, and, with the exception of the Negro, over who and what is American. Jones is aware of this and, although he embarrasses his own argument, his emphasis is to the point.

For it would seem that while Negroes have been undergoing a process of "Americanization" from a time preceding the birth of this nation—including the fusing of their bloodlines with other non-African strains—there has persisted a stubborn confusion as to their American identity. Somehow it was assumed that the Negroes, of all the diverse American peoples, would remain una ected by the climate, the weather, the political circumstances—from which not even slaves were exempt—the social structures, the national manners, the modes of production and the tides of

the market, the national ideals, the con icts of values, the rising and falling of

national morale, or the complex give and take of acculturalization which was undergone by all others who found their existence within American democracy. This confusion still persists, and it is Mr.

Jones's concern with it which gives *Blues People* a claim upon our attention.

Mr. Jones sees the American Negro as the product of a series of transformations, starting with the enslaved African, who became Afro-American slave, who became the American slave, who became, in turn, the highly quali ed "citizen" whom we know today. The slave began by regarding himself as enslaved African during the time when he still spoke his native language or remembered it, practiced such aspects of his native religion as were possible and expressed himself musically in modes which were essentially African. These cultural traits became transmuted as the African lost consciousness of his African background, and his music, religion, language and speech gradually became that of the American Negro.

His sacred music became the spirituals, his work songs and dance music became the blues and primitive jazz, and his religion became a form of Afro-American Christianity. With the end of slavery Jones sees the development of jazz and the blues as results of the more varied forms of experience made available to the freedman. By the twentieth century the blues divided and became, on the one hand, a professionalized form of entertainment, while remaining, on the other, a form of folklore.

By which I suppose he means that some Negroes remained in the country and sang a crude form of the blues, while others went to the city, became more sophisticated, and paid to hear Ma Rainey, Bessie or some of the other Smith girls sing them in night clubs or theaters.

Jones gets this mixed up with ideas of social class—middle-class Negroes, whatever that term actually means, and light-skinned Negroes, or those Negroes corrupted by what Jones calls "White"

culture—preferring the “classic” blues, and black, uncorrupted, country Negroes preferring “country blues.”

For as with his music, so with the Negro. As Negroes became

“middle class” they rejected their tradition and themselves; “… they wanted any self which the mainstream dictated, and the mainstream

always dictated. And this black middle class, in turn, tried always to dictate that self, or this image of a whiter Negro, to the poorer, blacker Negroes.”

One would get the impression that there was a rigid correlation between color, education, income and the Negro’s preference in music. But what are we to say of a white-skinned Negro with brown freckles who owns sixteen oil wells sunk in a piece of Texas land once farmed by his ex-slave parents who were a blue-eyed, white-skinned, redheaded (kinky) Negro woman from Virginia and a blue-gummed, black-skinned, curly-haired Negro male from Mississippi, and who not only sang bass in a Holy Roller church, played the market and voted Republican, but collected blues recordings and was a walking depository of blues tradition? Jones’s theory no more allows for the existence of such a Negro than it allows for himself, but that “concord of sensibilities” which has been de ned as the meaning of culture allows for much more variety than Jones would admit.

Much the same could be said of Jones’s treatment of the jazz during the thirties, when he claims its broader acceptance (i.e., its economic success as entertainment) led to a dilution, to the loss of much of its “black” character which caused a certain group of rebellious Negro musicians to create the “anti-mainstream” jazz style called bebop.

Jones sees bop as a conscious gesture of separatism, ignoring the fact that the creators of the style were seeking, whatever their musical intentions—and they were the least political of men—a fresh form of entertainment which would allow them their fair share of the entertainment market, which had been dominated by whites during the swing era. And although the boppers were reacting, at least in part, to the high artistic achievement of Armstrong, Hawkins, Basie and Ellington (all Negroes, all masters of the blues-jazz tradition), Jones sees their music as a recognition of his

contention “that when you are black in a society where black is an extreme liability [it] is one thing, but to understand that it is the society which is lacking and is impossibly deformed because of this lack, and not *yourself*, isolates you even more from that society.”

Perhaps. But today nothing succeeds like rebellion (which Jones as a “beat” poet should know), and while a few boppers went to Europe to escape, or became Muslims, others took the usual tours for the State Department. Whether this makes *them* “middle class” in Jones’s eyes I can’t say, but his assertions—which are ne as personal statement—are not in keeping with the facts; his theory ounders before that complex of human motives which makes human history, and which is so characteristic of the American Negro.

Read as a record of an earnest young man’s attempt to come to grips with his predicament as Negro American during a most turbulent period of our history, *Blues People* may be worth the reader’s time. Taken as a theory of American Negro culture, it can only contribute more confusion than clarity. For Jones has stumbled over that ironic obstacle which lies in the path of any who would fashion a theory of American Negro culture while ignoring the intricate network of connections which binds Negroes to the larger society. To do so is to attempt delicate brain surgery with a switchblade. And it is possible that any viable theory of Negro American culture obligates us to fashion a more adequate theory of American culture as a whole. The heel bone is, after all, connected through its various linkages to the head bone. Attempt a serious evaluation of our national morality, and up jumps the so-called Negro problem. Attempt to discuss jazz as a hermetic expression of Negro sensibility, and immediately we must consider what the

“mainstream” of American music really is.

Here political categories are apt to confuse, for while Negro slaves were socially, politically and economically separate (but only in a special sense even here), they were, in a cultural sense, much closer than Jones’s theory allows him to admit.

“A slave,” writes Jones, “cannot be a man.” But what, one might ask, of those moments when he feels his metabolism aroused by the rising of the sap in spring? What of his identity among other slaves?

With his wife? And isn't it closer to the truth that far from considering themselves only in terms of that abstraction, "a slave,"

the enslaved really thought of themselves as *men* who had been

unjustly enslaved? And isn't the true answer to Mr. Jones's question,

"What are you going to be when you grow up?" not, as he gives it,

"a slave" but most probably a coachman, a teamster, a cook, the best damned steward on the Mississippi, the best jockey in Kentucky, a butler, a farmer, a stud, or, hopefully, a free man!

Slavery was a most vicious system, and those who endured and survived it a tough people, but it was *not* (and this is important for Negroes to remember for the sake of their own sense of who and what their grandparents were) a state of absolute repression.

A slave was, to the extent that he was a *musician*, one who expressed himself in music, a man who realized himself in the world of sound. Thus, while he might stand in awe before the superior technical ability of a white musician, and while he was forced to recognize a superior social status, he would never feel awed before the music which the technique of the white musician made available. His attitude as "musician" would lead him to seek to possess the music expressed through the technique, but until he could do so he would hum, whistle, sing or play the tunes to the best of his ability on any available instrument. And it was, indeed, out of the tension between desire and ability that the techniques of jazz emerged. This was likewise true of American Negro choral singing. For this, no literary explanation, no cultural analyses, no political slogans—indeed, not even a high degree of social or political freedom—was required. For the art—the blues, the spirituals, the jazz, the dance—was what we had in place of freedom.

Technique was then, as today, the key to creative freedom, but before this came a will toward expression. Thus, Jones's theory to the contrary, Negro musicians have never, as a group, felt alienated from any music sounded within their hearing, and it is my theory that it would be impossible to

pinpoint the time when they were not shaping what Jones calls the mainstream of American music.

Indeed, what group of musicians has made more of the sound of the American experience? Nor am I con ning my statement to the sound of the slave experience, but am saying that the most

authoritative rendering of America in music is that of American Negroes.

For as I see it, from the days of their introduction into the colonies, Negroes have taken, with the ruthlessness of those without articulate investments in cultural styles, whatever they could of European music, making of it that which would, when blended with the cultural tendencies inherited from Africa, express their own sense of life, while rejecting the rest. Perhaps this is only another way of saying that whatever the degree of injustice and inequality sustained by the slaves, American culture was, even before the o cial founding of the nation, pluralistic, and it was the African's origin in cultures in which art was highly functional which gave him an edge in shaping the music and dance of this nation.

The question of social and cultural snobbery is important here.

The e ectiveness of Negro music and dance is rst recorded in the journals and letters of travelers but it is important to remember that they saw and understood only that which they were prepared to accept. Thus a Negro dancing a courtly dance appeared comic from the outside simply because the dancer was a slave. But to the Negro dancing it—and there is ample evidence that he danced it well—

burlesque or satire might have been the point, which might have been di cult for a white observer to even imagine. During the 1870s Lafcadio Hearn reports that the best singers of Irish songs, in Irish dialect, were Negro dockworkers in Cincinnati, and advertisements from slavery days described escaped slaves who spoke in Scottish dialect. The master artisans of the South were slaves, and white Americans have been walking Negro walks, talking Negro-avored talk (and prizing it when spoken by Southern belles), dancing Negro dances and singing Negro melodies far too long to talk of a "mainstream" of American culture to which they're alien.

Jones attempts to impose an ideology upon this cultural complexity, and this might be useful if he knew enough of the related subjects to make it interesting. But his version of the blues lacks a sense of the excitement and surprise of men living in the

world—of enslaved and politically weak men successfully imposing their values upon a powerful society through song and dance.

The blues speak to us simultaneously of the tragic and comic aspects of the human condition, and they express a profound sense of life shared by many Negro Americans precisely because their lives have combined these modes. This has been the heritage of a people who for hundreds of years could not celebrate birth or dignify death, and whose need to live despite the dehumanizing pressures of slavery developed an endless capacity for laughing at their painful experiences. This is a group experience shared by many Negroes, and any e ective study of the blues would treat them rst as poetry and as ritual. Jones makes a distinction between classic and country blues, the one being entertainment and the other folklore. But the distinction is false. Classic blues were both entertainment *and* a form of folklore. When they were sung professionally in theaters, they were entertainment; when danced to in the form of recordings or used as a means of transmitting the traditional verses and their wisdom, they were folklore. There are levels of time and function involved here, and the blues which might be used in one place as entertainment (as gospel music is now being used in night clubs and on theater stages) might be put to a ritual use in another. Bessie Smith might have been a “blues queen” to society at large, but within the tighter N egro community where the blues were part of a total way of life, and a major expression of an attitude toward life, she was a priestess, a celebrant who a rmed the values of the group and man’s ability to deal with chaos.

It is unfortunate that Jones thought it necessary to ignore the aesthetic nature of the blues in order to make his ideological point, for he might have come much closer had he considered the blues not as politics but as art. This would have still required the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, but as practiced by Constance Rourke, who was well aware of how much of American cultural expression is Negro. And he could learn

much from the Cambridge School's discoveries of the connection between poetry, drama and ritual as a means of analyzing how the blues function in their proper environment. Simple taste should have led Jones to

Stanley Edgar Hyman's work on the blues instead of Paul Oliver's sadly misdirected e ort.

For the blues are not primarily concerned with civil rights or obvious political protest; they are an art form and thus a transcendence of those conditions created within the Negro community by the denial of social justice. As such they are one of the techniques through which Negroes have survived and kept their courage during that long period when many whites assumed, as some still assume, that they were afraid.

Much has been made of the fact that *Blues People* is one of the few books by a Negro to treat the subject. Unfortunately for those who expect that Negroes would have a special insight into this mysterious art, this is not enough. Here, too, the critical intelligence must perform the di cult task which only it can perform.

From *The New York Review*, February 6, 1964.

III

THE SHADOW AND THE ACT

Some Questions and Some Answers *What do you understand* today *by "Negro culture"?*

What I understand by the term "Negro culture" is so vague as to be meaningless. Indeed, I nd the term "Negro" vague even in its racial connotations, for in Africa there are several nonwhite racial strains, and one suspects that the term came into usage as a means of obliterating cultural di erences between the various African peoples. In this way the ruthless disruption of highly developed cultures raised no troubling moral questions. The term, used mainly by whites, represented a "trained incapacity" to make or feel moral distinctions where black men were concerned.

As for the term “culture,” used in this connection, I know of no valid demonstration that culture is transmitted through the genes.

In Africa the blacks identify themselves by their tribal names; thus it is signi cant that it is only in the United States that the term

“Negro” has acquired speci c cultural content. Spelled with a capital “N” by most publications (one of the important early victories of my own people in their ght for self-de nition), the term describes a people whose origin began with the introduction of African slaves to the American colonies in 1619, and which today represents the fusing with the original African strains of many racial bloodlines—among them English, Irish, Scotch, French, Spanish and American Indian. Although the American Civil War brought an end to the importation of African peoples into the United States, this mixture of bloods has by no means ceased, not even in the South where the whites are obsessed with racial purity, so that today anthropologists tell us that very few American Negroes are of pure African blood. It occurs to me that in light of this, even if culture were transmitted through the bloodstream we would encounter quite a problem in explaining just how the genes bearing “Negro”

culture could so overpower those bearing French or English culture, which in all other ways are assumed to be superior.

But to continue, the American Negro people are North American in origin and have evolved under speci cally American conditions: climatic, nutritional, historical, political and social. They take their character from the experience of American slavery and the struggle for, and the achievement of, emancipation; from the dynamics of American race and caste discrimination; and from living in a highly industrialized and highly mobile society possessing a relatively high standard of living and an explicitly stated equalitarian concept of freedom. Its spiritual outlook is basically Protestant, its system of kinship is Western, its time and historical sense are American (United States), and its secular values are those professed, ideally at least, by all of the people of the United States.

Culturally this people represents one of the many subcultures which make up that great amalgam of European and native American cultures which is

the culture of the United States. This

“American Negro culture” is expressed in a body of folklore, in the musical forms of the spirituals, blues and jazz; an idiomatic version of American speech (especially in the southern United States); a cuisine; a body of dance forms; and even a dramaturgy which is generally unrecognized as such because it is still tied to the more folkish Negro churches. Some Negro preachers are great showmen.

It must, however, be pointed out that due to the close links which Negro Americans have with the rest of the nation, these cultural expressions are constantly in uencing the larger body of American culture and are in turn in uenced by them. Nor should the existence of a speci cally “Negro” idiom in any way be confused with the vague, racist terms “white culture” or “black culture”; rather, it is a matter of diversity within unity. One could indeed go further and say that in this sense there is no other “Negro” culture. Haitians, for instance, are an “American” people and predominantly dark, but their culture is an expression of Haitian conditions; it re ects the in uence of French culture and the fusion of Catholic and native Haitian religious outlooks. Thus, since most so-called “Negro cultures” outside Africa are necessarily amalgams, it would seem

more pro table to stress the term “culture” and leave the term

“Negro” out of the discussion. It is not culture which binds the peoples who are of partially African origin now scattered throughout the world, but an identity of passions. We share a hatred for the alienation forced upon us by Europeans during the process of colonization and empire, and we are bound by our common su ering more than by our pigmentation. But even this identi cation is shared by most nonwhite peoples, and while it has political value of great potency, its cultural value is almost nil.

In your opinion was there before the arrival of Europeans a single Negro culture that all Negroes shared, or was it the case, as among the whites, that there had been many di erent cultures, such as Judeo-Christianity, Brahmanism, etc.?

Before the arrival of Europeans there were many African cultures.

What is the role of modem industrial evolution in the spiritual crisis of the Negro people of our times? Does industrial progress (capitalist or socialist) endanger the future of a genuine Negro culture?

The role of modern industrial evolution in the spiritual crisis of those whom you refer to as “Negro” peoples seems to me to be as ambiguous as its role in the lives of peoples of any racial identity: it depends upon how much human su ering must go into the achievement of industrialization, upon who operates the industries, upon how the products and pro ts are shared, and upon the wisdom used in imposing technology upon the institutions and traditions of each particular society. Ironically, black men with the status of slaves contributed much of the brute labor which helped get the Industrial Revolution under way; in this process they were exploited, their natural resources were ravaged, their institutions and their cultures were devastated, and in most instances they were denied anything like participation in the European cultures which owered as a result of the transformation of civilization under the

growth of technology. But now it is precisely technology which promises them release from the brutalizing e ects of over three hundred years of racism and European domination. Men cannot unmake history: thus it is not a question of reincarnating those cultural traditions which were destroyed, but a matter of using industrialization, modern medicine, modern science generally, to work in the interest of these peoples rather than against them. Nor is the disruption of continuity with the past necessarily a totally negative phenomenon; sometimes it makes possible a modulation of a people’s way of life which allows for a more creative use of its energies. The United States is ample proof of this, and though we su er much from the rupture of tradition, great good has come to the world through those achievements which were made possible.

One thing seems clear: certain possibilities of culture are achievable only through the presence of industrial techniques.

It is not industrial progress per se which damages peoples or cultures; it is the exploitation of peoples in order to keep the machines fed with raw materials. It seems to me that the whole world is moving toward some new cultural synthesis, and partially through the discipline imposed by

technology. There is, I believe, a threat when industrialism is linked to a political doctrine which has as its goal the subjugation of the world.

Is the birth of various religions in present Negro societies progressive or regressive asfar as culture is concerned?

I am unacquainted with the religious movements in the societies to which you refer. If the Mau Mau is one of these, then I must say that for all my disgust for those who provoked the natives to such obscene extremes, I feel it to be regressive indeed.

Several Negro poets from Africa explain that they write in French or English because the ancient languages are not adequate to express their feeling any longer. What do you think about this?

When it comes to poetry the vagueness of the term “Negro” becomes truly appalling, for if there is a “Negro” language I am unacquainted with it. Are these people Bantu, Sudanese, Nigerian, Watusi or what? As for the poets in question, it seems to me that in a general way they are faced by the problem confronted by the Irish, who for all their e orts to keep their language vital have had nevertheless their greatest poets expressing themselves in English, as in the case of Shaw, Yeats, Joyce and O’Casey. Perhaps the poet’s true language is that in which he dreams. At any rate, it is true that for some time now poets throughout the world have drawn freely from all the world’s tongues in order to create their vocabularies. One uses whatever one needs to best express one’s vision of the human predicament.

Another way of approaching the matter is to view the poem as a medium of communication; to whom do these poets wish to speak?

Each poet creates his own language from that which he nds around him. Thus if these poets nd the language of Shakespeare or Racine inadequate to reach their own peoples, then the other choice is to recreate their original language to the point where they may express their complex emotions. This is the manner in which the poet makes his contribution to literature, and the greatest literary creation of any culture is its language. Further, language is most alive when it is capable of dealing with the realities in which it operates. In the myth, God gave man the task of naming the objects of the

world; thus one of the functions of the poet is to insist upon a correspondence between words and ever-changing reality, between ideals and actualities. The domain of the unstated, the unde ned is his to conquer.

In my own case, having inherited the language of Shakespeare and Melville, Mark Twain and Lincoln and no other, I try to do my part in keeping the American language alive and rich by using in my work the music and idiom of American Negro speech, and by insisting that the words of this language correspond with the reality of American life as seen by my own people. Perhaps if I were a member of a bilingual society I would approach my task di erently,

but my work is addressed primarily to those who have my immediate group experience, for I am not protesting nor pleading my humanity; I am trying to communicate, to articulate and de ne a group experience.

What do you think of the present level of Negro sculpture? What future do you see for it?

I know little of current work in sculpture by Africans, but that which I have seen appears to possess little of that high artistic excellence characteristic of ancient African art. American Negro sculpture is, of course, simply American sculpture done by Negroes.

Some is good, some bad. I don’t see any possibility of work by these artists being created in a vacuum outside of those in uences, national and international, individual and abstract, which in uence any other American artist. When African sculpture is one in uence, it comes to them through the Cubists, just as it did to most contemporary artists. That phenomenon which Malraux calls the

“Imaginary Museum” draws no color line.

As for the future of African sculpture, it depends upon the future role which art will play in African societies which are now struggling into being. I doubt, however, that sculpture will ever play the same role that the so-called primitive art played, because the tribal societies which called this art into being have either been shattered or are being rapidly transformed. And if

the in uence of the primitive sculptures is to be seen in European art wherever one turns, so have the in uences of modern Western art found their way to Africa. This process is more likely to increase rather than lessen.

To the extent that art is an expression of transcendent values, the role of sculpture in these societies will depend upon the values of those societies.

What do you think of the future of "Negro music"?

I know only American Negro music, in this sense of the term. This music consists of jazz and the spirituals, but as with all things cultural in the United States these forms have been and are still being subjected to a constant process of assimilation. Thus, although it was the speci c experience of Negroes which gave rise to these forms, they expressed and gave signi cance to feelings and sounds so characteristically American that both spirituals and jazz have been absorbed into the musical language of the culture as a whole.

On the other hand, American Negro music was never created in a vacuum; it was the shaping of musical elements found in the culture

—European, American Indian, the Afro-American rhythmical sense, the sound of the Negro voice—to the needs of a particular group.

Today jazz is a national art form, but for me personally the source of the purist stream of this music is the Negro community, wherein the commercial motive in popular music is weaker, and where jazz remains vital because it is still linked with the Saturday night or Sunday morning breakfast dance, which are still among the living social forms functioning within the Negro community.

Nor does this in any way contradict the fact that some of the leaders in the modern jazz movement are Negroes; we still move from the folk community to a highly conscious acquaintance with twelve-tone composers and their methods in less time than it takes to complete a course in counterpoint, and these modern methods are quickly absorbed into the body of classical jazz. A man like Duke Ellington remains a vital and imaginative

composer precisely because he has never severed his tie with the Negro dance, and because his approach to the world's musical speech is eclectic.

Nevertheless there is the danger that the rapid absorption of Negro American musical forms by commercial interests and their rapid vulgarization and dissemination through the mass media will corrupt the Negro's own taste, just as in Mexico the demand for modern designs in silver jewelry for export is leading to a dying away of native design. Thus I say that much of the future depends upon the self-acceptance of the Negro composer and his integrity toward his musical tradition. Nor do I exclude the so-called serious

composer; all are faced with the humanist American necessity of nding the balance between progress and continuity, between tradition and experimentation. For the jazz artist there is some insurance in continuing to play for dance audiences, for here the criticism is unspoiled by status-directed theories; Negroes simply won't accept shoddy dance music, so the artist has a vital criticism danced out in the ritual of the dance.

Since the spirituals are religious music, it would seem that their future is assured by the revitalization of Negro American churches, as is demonstrated in the leadership which these churches are giving in the struggle for civil rights. The old songs play quite a part in this, and they in turn throb with new emotion owing from the black American's revaluation of his experience. Negroes are no longer ashamed of their slave past but see in it sources of strength, and it is now generally recognized that the spirituals bespoke their birth as a people and asserted and de ned their humanity. The desegregation struggle is only the sociopolitical manifestation of this process. Commercial rock-and-roll music is a brutalization of one stream of contemporary Negro church music, but I do not believe that even this obscene looting of a cultural expression can permanently damage the vital source—not for racial reasons but because for some time to come Negroes will live close to their traditional cultural patterns. Nor do I believe that as we win our struggle for full participation in American life we will abandon our group expression. Too much living and aspiration have gone into it, so that, drained of its elements of defensiveness and alienation, it will become even more precious to us, for

we will see it ever clearer as a transcendent value. What we have counterpoised against the necessary rage for progress in American life (and which we share with other Americans) will have been proved to be at least as valuable as all our triumphs of technology. In spilling out his heart's blood in his contest with the machine, John Henry was asserting a national value as well as a Negro value.

What do you think of the attempt of Brazilian and American Negroes to adopt "white values" in place of "Negro values"? Is this only an illusion on their part, or will it be a source of creative development?

I am unquali ed to speak of Brazil, but in the United States, the values of my own people are neither "white" nor "black"; they are American. Nor can I see how they could be anything else, since we are a people who are involved in the texture of the American experience. And indeed, today the most dramatic ght for American ideals is being sparked by black Americans. Signi cantly, we are the only black peoples who are not ghting for separation from the

"whites," but for a fuller participation in the society which we share with "whites." And it is of further signi cance that we pursue our goals precisely in terms of American constitutionalism. If there is anything in this which points to "black values" it must lie in the circumstance that we really believe that all men are created equal and that they should be given a chance to achieve their highest potentialities, regardless of race, creed, color or past condition of servitude.

The terms in which the question is couched serve to obscure the cultural fact that the dynamism of American life is as much a part of the Negro American's personality as it is of the white American's.

We di er from certain white Americans in that we have no reason to assume that race has a positive value, and in that we reject race thinking wherever we nd it. And even this attitude is shared by millions of whites. Nor are we interested in being anything other than *Negro* Americans. One's racial identity is, after all, accidental, but the United States is an international country, and its conscious character makes it possible for us to abandon the mistakes of the past. The point of our struggle is to be both Negro and

American and to bring about that condition in American society in which this would be possible. In brief, there is an American Negro idiom, a style and a way of life, but none of this is inseparable from the conditions of American society, nor from its general modes or culture—mass distribution, race and intranational con icts, the radio, television, its system of education, its politics. If general

American values in uence us; we in turn in uence them—in speech, concept of liberty, justice, economic distribution, international outlook, our current attitude toward colonialism, our national image of ourselves as a nation. And this despite the fact that nothing which black Americans have won as a people has been won without struggle. For *no* group within the United States achieves anything without asserting its claims against the counterclaims of other groups. Thus, as Americans we have accepted this conscious and ceaseless struggle as a condition of our freedom, and we are aware that each of our victories increases the area of freedom for all Americans, regardless of color. When we nally achieve the right of full participation in American life, what we make of it will depend upon our sense of cultural values and our creative use of freedom, not upon our racial identi cation. I see no reason why the heritage of world culture, which represents a continuum, should be confused with the notion of race. Japan erected a highly e cient modern technology upon a religious culture which viewed the Emperor as a god. The Germany which produced Beethoven and Hegel and Mann turned its science and technology to the monstrous task of genocide; one hopes that when what are known as “Negro” societies are in full possession of the world’s knowledge and in control of their destinies, they will bring to an end all those savageries which for centuries have been committed in the name of race. From what we are witnessing in certain parts of the world today, however, there is no guarantee that simply being nonwhite o ers any guarantee of this. The demands of state policy are apt to be more in uential than morality. I would like to see a quali ed Negro as President of the United States, but I suspect that even if this were today possible, the necessities of the o ce would shape his actions far more than his racial identity.

Would that we could but put the correct questions in these matters, perhaps then great worlds of human energy could be saved, especially by those of us

who would be free.

From *Preuves*, May 1958.

The Shadow and the Act

FAULKNER has given us a metaphor. When, in the lm *Intruder in the Dust*, the young Mississipian Chick Mallison falls into an ice-coated creek on a Negro's farm, he nds that he has plunged into the depth of a reality which constantly reveals itself as the reverse of what it had appeared before his plunge. Here the ice—white, brittle and eggshell-thin—symbolizes Chick's inherited views of the world, especially his Southern conception of Negroes. Emerging more shocked by the air than by the water, he nds himself locked in a moral struggle with the owner of the land, Lucas Beauchamp, the son of a slave who, while aiding the boy, angers him by refusing to act toward him as Southern Negroes are expected to act.

To Lucas, Chick is not only a child but his guest. Thus he not only dries the boy's clothes, but insists that he eat the only food in the house, Lucas's own dinner. When Chick (whose white standards won't allow him to accept the hospitality of a Negro) attempts to pay him, Lucas refuses to accept the money. What follows is one of the most sharply amusing studies of Southern racial ethics to be seen anywhere. Asserting his whiteness, Chick throws the money on the oor, ordering Lucas to pick it up; Lucas, disdaining to quarrel with a child, has Chick's young Negro companion, Aleck Sander, return the coins.

Defeated but still determined, Chick later seeks to discharge his debt by sending Lucas and his wife a gift. Lucas replies by sending Chick a gallon of molasses by—outrage of all Southern Negro outrages!—a white boy on a mule. This is too much, and from that moment it becomes Chick's passion to repay his debt and to see Lucas for once "act like a nigger." The opportunity has come, he thinks, when Lucas is charged with shooting a white man in the back. But instead of humbling himself, Lucas (from his cell) tells,

almost orders, Chick to prove him innocent by violating the white man's grave.

In the end we see Chick recognizing Lucas as the representative of those virtues of courage, pride, independence and patience that are usually attributed only to white men—and, in his uncle's words, accepting the Negro as "the keeper of our [the whites']

consciences." This bit of dialogue, coming after the real murderer is revealed as the slain man's own brother, is, when viewed historically, about the most remarkable concerning a Negro ever to come out of Hollywood.

With this conversation, the falling into creeks, the digging up of corpses and the confronting of lynch mobs that mark the plot, all take on a new signi cance: not only have we been watching the consciousness of a young Southerner grow through the stages of a superb mystery drama, but we have participated in a process by which the role of Negroes in American life has been given what, for the movies, is a startling new de nition.

To appreciate fully the signi cance of *Intruder in the Dust* in the history of Hollywood we must go back to the lm that is regarded as the archetype of the modern American motion picture, *The Birth of a Nation*.

Originally entitled *The Clansman*, the lm was inspired by another Southern novel, the Reverend Thomas Dixon's work of that title, which also inspired Joseph Simmons to found the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. (What a role these malignant clergymen have played in our lives!) Retitled *The Birth of a Nation* as an afterthought, it was this lm that forged the twin screen image of the Negro as bestial rapist and grinning, eye-rolling clown—stereotypes that are still with us today. Released during 1915, it resulted in controversy, riots, heavy pro ts and the growth of the Klan. Of it Terry Ramsaye, a historian of the American motion-picture industry writes: "The picture … and the K.K.K, secret society, which was the afterbirth of a nation, were sprouted from the same root. In subsequent years they reacted upon each other to the large pro t of both. The lm

presented predigested dramatic experience and thrills. The society made the customers all actors in costume."

Usually *The Birth of a Nation* is discussed in terms of its contributions to cinema technique, but as with every other technical advance since the

oceanic sailing ship, it became a further instrument in the dehumanization of the Negro. And while few lms have gone so far in projecting Negroes in a malignant light, few before the 1940s showed any concern with depicting their humanity. Just the opposite. In the struggle against Negro freedom, motion pictures have been one of the strongest instruments for justifying some white Americans' anti-Negro attitudes and practices.

Thus the South, through D. W. Gri th's genius, captured the enormous mythmaking potential of the lm form almost from the beginning. While the Negro stereotypes by no means made all white men Klansmen, the cinema did, to the extent that audiences accepted its image of Negroes, make them participants in the South's racial ritual of keeping the Negro "in his place."

After Reconstruction the political question of what was to be done with Negroes, "solved" by the Hayes-Tilden deal of 1876, came down to the psychological question: "How can the Negro's humanity be evaded?" The problem, arising in a democracy that holds all men as created equal, was a highly moral one; democratic ideals had to be squared with anti-Negro practices. One answer was to *deny* the Negro's humanity, a pattern set long before 1915. But with the release of *The Birth of a Nation* the propagation of subhuman images of Negroes became nancially and dramatically pro table. The Negro as scapegoat could be sold as entertainment; it could even be exported. If the lm became the main manipulator of the American dream, for Negroes that dream contained a strong dose of such stu as nightmares are made of.

We are recalling all this not so much as a means of indicting Hollywood as by way of placing *Intruder in the Dust*, and such recent lms as *Home of the Brave, Lost Boundaries* and *Pinky*, in perspective.

To direct an attack upon Hollywood would indeed be to confuse portrayal with action, image with reality. In the beginning was not the shadow but the act, and the province of Hollywood is not action,

but illusion. Actually, the anti-Negro images of the lms were (and are) acceptable because of the existence throughout the United States of an audience obsessed with an inner psychological need to view Negroes as less than men. Thus, psychologically and ethically, these negative images

constitute justi cations for all those acts, legal, emotional, economic and political, which we label Jim Crow.

The anti-Negro image is a ritual object of which Hollywood is not the creator, but the manipulator. Its role has been that of justifying the widely held myth of Negro unhumanness and inferiority by o ering entertaining rituals through which that myth could be rea rmed.

The great signi cance of the de nition of Lucas Beauchamp's role in *Intruder in the Dust* is that it makes explicit the nature of Hollywood's changed attitude toward Negroes. Form being, in the words of Kenneth Burke, "the psychology of the audience," what is taking place in the American movie patron's mind? Why these new attempts to rede ne the Negro's role? What has happened to the audience's mode of thinking?

For one thing, there was the war; for another, there is the fact that the United States' position as a leader in world a airs is shaken by its treatment of Negroes. Thus the thinking of white Americans is undergoing a process of change, and re ecting that change, we nd that each of the lms mentioned above deals with some basic and unusually negative assumption about Negroes: are Negroes cowardly soldiers? *(Home of the Brave);* are Negroes the real polluters of the South? *(Intruder in the Dust);* have mulatto Negroes the right to pass as white, at the risk of having black babies, or if they have white-skinned children, of having to kill o their "white" identities by revealing to them that they are, alas, Negroes? *(Lost Boundaries);* and, nally, should Negro girls marry white men or—wonderful non sequitur—should they help their race? *(Pinky)*.

Obviously these lms are not *about* Negroes at all; they are about what whites think and feel about Negroes. And if they are taken as accurate re ectors of that thinking, it becomes apparent that there is much confusion. To make use of Faulkner's metaphor again, the lm makers fell upon the eggshell ice but, unlike the child, weren't

heavy enough to break it. And being unable to break it, they were unable to discover the real direction of their lm narratives. In varying degree, they were unwilling to dig into the grave to expose the culprit, and thus we nd

them using ingenious devices for evading the full human rights of their Negroes. The result represents a defeat not only of drama, but of purpose.

In *Home of the Brave*, for instance, a psychiatrist tells the Negro soldier that his hysterical paralysis is like that of any other soldier who has lived when his friends have died, and we hear the soldier pronounced cured; indeed, we see him walk away prepared to open a bar and restaurant with a white veteran. But here there is an evasion (and by *evasion* I refer to the manipulation of the audience's attention away from reality to focus it upon false issues), because the guilt from which the Negro is supposed to su er springs from an incident in which, immediately after his friend has called him a

"yellowbelly nigger," he has wished the friend dead—only to see the wish granted by a sniper's bullet.

What happens to this racial element in the motivation of his guilt?

The psychiatrist ignores it and becomes a sleight-of-hand artist who makes it vanish by repeating again that the Negro is like everybody else. Nor, I believe, is this accidental, for it is here exactly that we come to the question of whether Negroes can rightfully be expected to risk their lives in an army in which they are slandered and discriminated against. Psychiatry is not, I'm afraid, the answer. The soldier su ers from concrete acts, not hallucinations.

And so with the others. In *Lost Boundaries* the question evaded is whether a mulatto Negro has the right to practice the old American pragmatic philosophy of capitalizing upon one's assets. For after all, whiteness *has* been given an economic and social value in our culture, and for the doctor upon whose life the lm is based,

"passing" was the quickest and most certain means to success.

Yet Hollywood is uncertain about his right to do this. The lm does not render the true circumstances. In real life Dr. Albert Johnson, the Negro doctor who "passed" as white, purchased the thriving practice of a deceased

physician in Gorham, New Hampshire, for a thousand dollars. Instead, a ction is introduced in

the lm wherein Dr. Carter's initial motivation for "passing" arises after he is refused an internship by dark Negroes in an Atlanta hospital because of his color! It just isn't real, since there are thousands of mulattoes living as Negroes in the South, many of them Negro leaders. The only functional purpose served by this ction is to gain sympathy for Carter by placing part of the blame for his predicament upon black Negroes. Nor should the irony be missed that part of the sentiment evoked when the Carters are welcomed back into the community is gained by painting Negro life as horrible, a fate worse than a living death. It would seem that in the eyes of Hollywood it is only "white" Negroes who ever su er—

or is it merely the "white" corpuscles of their blood?

Pinky, for instance, is the story of another su ering mulatto, and the su ering grows out of a confusion between race and love. If we attempt to reduce the heroine's problem to sentence form we'd get something like this: "Should white-skinned Negro girls marry white men, or should they inherit the plantations of old white aristocrats (provided they can nd any old aristocrats to will them their plantations), or should they live in the South and open nursery schools for black Negroes?" It doesn't follow, but neither does the action. After sitting through a lm concerned with interracial marriage, we see it suddenly become a courtroom battle over whether Negroes have the right to inherit property.

Pinky wins the plantation, and her lover, who has read of the ght in the Negro press, arrives and still loves her, race be hanged.

But now Pinky decides that to marry him would "violate the race"

and that she had better remain a Negro. Ironically, nothing is said about the fact that her racial integrity, whatever that is, was violated before she was born. Her parents are never mentioned in the lm. Following the will of the white aristocrat, who, before dying, advises her to "be true to herself," she opens a school for darker Negroes.

But in real life the choice is not between loving or denying one's race. Many couples manage to intermarry without violating their integrity, and indeed their marriage becomes the concrete expression of their integrity. In the lm Jeanne Crain oats about

like a sleepwalker, which seems to me to be exactly the way a girl so full of unreality would act. One thing is certain: no one is apt to mistake her for a Negro, not even a white one.

And yet despite the absurdities with which these lms are laden, they are all worth seeing, and if seen, capable of involving us emotionally. That they do is testimony to the deep centers of American emotion that they touch. Dealing with matters which, over the years, have been slowly charging up with guilt, they all display a vitality which escapes their slickest devices. And naturally enough, one of the most interesting experiences connected with viewing them in predominantly white audiences is the profuse ow of tears and sighs of profound emotional catharsis heard on all sides.

It is as though there were some deep relief to be gained merely from seeing these subjects projected upon the screen.

It is here precisely that a danger lies. For the temptation toward self-congratulation which comes from seeing these lms and sharing in their emotional release is apt to blind us to the true nature of what is unfolding—or failing to unfold—before our eyes. As an antidote to the sentimentality of these lms, I suggest that they be seen in predominantly Negro audiences, for here, when the action goes phony, one will hear derisive laughter, not sobs. (Perhaps this is what Faulkner means about Negroes keeping the white man's conscience.) Seriously, *Intruder in the Dust* is the only lm that could be shown in Harlem without arousing unintended laughter, for it is the only one of the four in which Negroes can make complete identi cation with their screen image. Interestingly, the factors that make this identi cation possible lie in its depiction not of racial but of human qualities.

Yet in the end, turning from art to life, we must even break with the de nition of the Negro's role given us by Faulkner. For when it comes to conscience, we know that in this world each of us, black and white alike,

must become the keeper of his own. This, in the deepest sense, is what these four lms, taken as a group, should help us realize.

Faulkner himself seems to realize it. In the book *Intruder in the Dust*, Lucas attempts not so much to be the keeper of anyone else's

conscience as to preserve his own life. Chick, in aiding Lucas, achieves that view of truth on which his own conscience depends.

From *The Reporter*, December 6, 1949.

The Way It Is

THE boy looked at me through the cracked door and stood staring with his large eyes until his mother came and invited me in. It was an average Harlem apartment, cool now with the shift in the fall weather. The room was clean and furnished with the old-fashioned furniture found so often up our way: two old upholstered chairs and a divan upon a faded blue and red rug. It was painfully clean, and the furniture crowded the narrow room.

"Sit right there, sir," the woman said. "It's where Wilbur use to sit before he went to camp; it's pretty comfortable."

I watched her ease herself tiredly upon the divan, the light from the large red lamp re ected upon her face from the top of a mirrored side table.

She must have been fty, her hair slightly graying. The portrait of a young soldier smiled back from the top of a radio cabinet beside her.

She pointed. "That's my boy Wilbur right there," she said proudly.

"He's a sergeant."

"Wilbur's got a medal for shooting so good," the boy said.

"You just be quiet and go eat your supper," she said. "All you can think about is guns and shooting." She spoke with the harsh tenderness so often used by Negro mothers.

The boy went, reluctantly opening the door. The odor of peas and rice and pork chops drifted through.

“Who was it, Tommy?” shrilled a voice on the other side.

“You two be quiet in there and eat your supper now,” Mrs.

Jackson called. “Them two just keeps my hands full. They just get into something *all* the time. I was coming up the street the other day and like to got the fright of my life. There was Tommy hanging on the back of a streetcar! But didn’t I tan his bottom! I bet he won’t even *look* at a streetcar for a long, long time. It ain’t really that he’s

a *bad* child; it’s just that he tries to do what he sees the other boys do. I wanted to send both him and his sister away to camp for the summer, but things was so tight this year that I couldn’t do it.

Raising kids in Harlem nowadays is more than a notion.”

As is true so often in Negro American life, Mrs. Jackson, the mother, is the head of her family. Her husband had died several years ago; the smaller children were babies. She had kept going by doing domestic work, and had kept the family together with the help of the older boy.

There is a quiet courage about Mrs. Jackson, and yet now and then the clenching and unclenching of her work-hardened ngers betray an anxiety that does not register in her face. I o er to wait until after she has eaten, but she says no, that she is too tired right now and would rather talk than eat.

“You nding the writing business any better since the war?” she asked.

“I’m afraid not,” I said.

“Is that so? Well, I don’t know nothing about the writing business.

I just know that don’t many colored go in for it. But I guess like everything else, some folks is doing good while others ain’t. The other day I was over on 126th Street and saw them dispossessing a lawyer! Yes, sir, it was like back in the thirties. Things piled all over the sidewalk, the Negroes a-

hanging out of the windows, and the poor man rushing around trying to get his stu o the streets before it got dark and everything."

I remembered the incident myself, having passed through the street that afternoon. Files, chest of drawers, bedsteads, tables and barrels had been piled along the sidewalk with pink, blue and white mattresses and bundles of table linen and bedclothing piled on top.

And the crowd had been as she described: some indignant, some curious, and all talking in subdued tones so as not to o end the evicted family. Law books had been piled upon the sidewalk near where a black and white kitten —and these are no writer's details—

played games with itself in the coils of an upright bedspring. I told her I had seen the incident.

"Lord," she said. "And did you see all those law books he had?

Looks like to me that anybody with all those books of law oughtn't to never get dispossessed.

"I was dispossessed, myself, back in thirty-seven, when we were all out of work. And they threatened me once since Wilbur's been in the Army. But I stood up for my rights, and when the government sent the check we pulled through. Anybody's liable to get dispossessed, though." She said it defensively.

"Just how do you nd it otherwise?" I asked.

"Things is mighty tight, son … You'll have to excuse me for calling you 'son,' because I suspect you must be just about Wilbur's age." She sat back abruptly. "How come you not in the Army?" she asked.

"I've a wife and dependents," I said.

"I see." She pondered. "Wilbur would have got married too, but he was helping me with the kids."

"That's the way it goes," I said.

“Things is tight,” she said again. “With food so high and everything, I sometimes don’t know what’s going to happen. Then, too, with Wilbur in the Army we naturally misses the money he use to bring in.” She regarded me shrewdly. “So you want to know about how we’re doing? Don’t you live in Harlem?”

“Oh, yes, but I want to know what *you* think about it.”

“So’s you can write it up?”

“Some of it, sure, but I won’t use your name.”

“Oh, I don’t care ’bout that. I *want* them to know how I feel.”

She became silent. Then, “You didn’t tell me where you live, you know,” she said cagily. I had to laugh and she laughed too.

“I live up near Amsterdam Avenue,” I said.

“You telling me the truth?”

“Honest.”

“And is your place a nice one?”

“Just average. You know how they go,” I said.

“I bet you live up there on Sugar Hill.”

“Not me,” I said.

“And you’re sure you’re not one of these investigators?”

“Of course not.”

“I bet you are too.” She smiled.

I shook my head and she laughed.

“They always starting something new,” she said. “You can’t keep up with them.”

But now she seemed reassured and settled down to talk, her hands clasped loosely in her lap against the checkered design of her dress.

“Well, we’re carrying on somehow. I’m still working and I manage to keep the young uns in school, and I pays the rent too. I guess maybe it would be a little better if the government would send the checks on time …”

She paused and pointed across the room to the picture of a young woman. “And it would be even better if Mary, that’s my next oldest after Wilbur—if she could get some of that defense training so she could get a job what pays decent money. But it don’t look like she’s going to get anything. She was out to the Western Electric plant in Kearney, New Jersey, the other day and they give her some kind of test, but that was the end of that.”

“Did she pass the test?” I asked.

“Sure she passed. But they just put her name down on a card and told her they would keep her in mind. They always do that. They ask her a lot of questions; then they want to know if she ever had any experience in running machines, and when she says she ain’t, they just take down her name. Now where is a colored girl going to get any experience in running all these kinds of machines they never even seen before?”

When I could not answer she threw up her hands.

“Well, there you have it, they got you any which way you turn. A few gets jobs, but most don’t.”

“Things are much better outside of New York,” I said.

“So I hear,” she said. “Guess if I was younger I’d take the kids and move to Jersey or up to Connecticut, where I hear there’s some jobs for colored. Or even down South. Only I keep hearing about the trouble they’re having down there, and I don’t want the kids to grow up down there nohow. Had enough of that when I was a kid

…”

“Have any of your friends gotten work through the F.E.P.C.?”

She thought for a moment.

“No, son. It seems to me that that committee is doing something everywhere but here in New York. Maybe that’s why it’s so bad for us—and you know it’s bad ’cause you’re colored yourself.”

As I heard the clatter of dishes coming from the kitchen, her face suddenly assumed an outraged expression.

“Now you take my sister’s boy, William. God bless his poor soul.

William went to the trade schools and learned all about machines.

He got so he could take any kind of machine apart and x it and put it together again. He was machine-crazy! But he was a smart boy and a good boy. He got good marks in school too. But when he went to get a job in one of those factories where they make war machines of some kind, they wouldn’t take him ’cause he was colored— *and they told him so!”*

She paused for breath, a red ush dyeing her skin. The tinted portrait of a brown mother holding a brown, shiny-haired baby posed madonna-like from a calendar above her head.

“Well, when they wouldn’t take him some of the folks over to the church told him to take his case to the F.E.P.C., and he did. But they had so many cases and it took so long that William got discouraged and joined up in the Merchant Marine. That poor boy was just so disgusted that he said that he would have enlisted in the Army, only that his mamma’s got two little ones like I have. So he went out on that boat ’cause it paid good money and a good bonus. It was real good money and he helped his mamma a heap. But it didn’t last long before one of those submarines sunk the boat.”

Her eyes strayed to the window, where a line of potted plants crowded the sill, a profusion of green things slowly becoming silhouettes in the fading

light. Snake plants, English ivy, and others, a potato plant in a glass jar, its vines twining around a cross of wood and its thousand thread-ne roots pushing hungrily against the wall of glass. A single red bloom pushed above the rest, and in one corner a corn plant threatened to touch the ceiling from the oor with its blade-like leaves.

The light was fading and her voice had slipped into the intense detachment of recent grief. “It was just about four months yesterday,” she said. “He was such a ne boy. Everybody liked William.”

She shook her head silently, her ngers gripping her folded arms as she swallowed tensely.

“It hurts to think about it,” she said, getting up and snapping on another light, revealing a child’s airplane model beneath the table.

“Well, the folks from his union is being very nice to my sister, the whites as well as the colored. And you know,” she added, leaning toward me, “it really makes you feel a little better when they come round—the white ones, I mean—and really tries to help. Like some of these ole relief investigators who come in wanting to run your life for you, but really like they interested in you. Something like colored folks, in a way. We used to get after William for being with white folks so much, but these sure have shown themselves to be real friends.”

She stared at me as though it was a fact which she deeply feared to accept.

“Some of them is going to try and see that my sister gets some sort of defense work. But what I’m trying to tell you is that it’s a sin and a shame that a ne boy like William had to go fooling round on them ships when ever since he was a little ole boy he’d been crazy about machines.”

“But don’t you think that the Merchant Marine is helping to win the war?” I said. “It takes brave men to go out there, and they’ve done a lot.”

“Sure they have,” she said. “Sure they have. But I’m not talking about that. Anybody could do what they had him doing on that boat. Anybody can wait

tables who's got sense enough to keep his ngernails clean! Waiting tables, when he could *make* things on a machine!

"You see that radio there? Well, William made that radio. It ain't no store set, no, sir, even though it looks like one. William made it for the kids. Made everything but the cabinet, and you can hear way down to Cuba and Mexico with it. And to think of that boy! Oh, it

makes me so mad I don't know what to do! He ought to be here right now helping his mamma and lil brother and sister. But what can you do? You educated, son, you one of our educated Negroes that's been to college and everything. Now you tell me, *what can we do?"* She paused. "I'm a colored woman, and colored women can take it. I can hit the chillies to the subway every morning and stand in the white folks' kitchen all day long, but so much is happening in the world that I don't know which way to turn. First it's my sister's boy, and then they sends my own boy down to Fort Bragg. I tells you I'm even afraid to open Wilbur's letters, some of the things he tells is so awful. I'm even afraid to open letters that the *government* sends sometimes about his insurance or something like that 'cause I'm afraid it might be a message that Wilbur's been beaten up or killed by some of those white folks down there. Then I gets so mad I don't know what to do. I use to pray, but praying don't do no good.

And too, like the union folks was telling us when we was so broken up about William, we got to ght the big Hitler over yonder even with all the little Hitlers over here. I wish they'd hurry up and send Wilbur on out of the country 'cause then maybe my mind would know some ease. Lord!" she sighed. "If it wasn't so serious I'd break down and laugh at my own-self."

She smiled now and the tension eased from her face and she leaned back against the divan and laughed. Then she became serious again.

"But son, you really can't laugh about it. Not honestly laugh like you can about some things. It reminds me of that crazy man what's always running up and down the streets up here. You know, the one who's always hollering at the cars and making out like he's throwing bombs?"

"Of course, I've seen him often," I said.

“Sure you have. Well, I use to laugh at that poor man when he’d start acting the fool—you know how it is, you feel sorry for him but you can’t help but laugh. They say he got that way in the last war.

Well, I can understand him better now. ’Course I ain’t had no bombs bursting in my ears like he had. But yet and still, with things pulling

me thisaway and thataway, I sometimes feel that I’m going to go screaming up and down the streets just like that poor fellow does.”

“He’s shell-shocked,” I said. “Sometimes I’ve seen him talking and acting just as normal as anyone.”

“Is that so?” she said. “I always thought it was funny he never got hit by a car. I’ve seen them almost hit him, but he goes right back.

One day I heard a man say, ‘Lord, if that crazy fellow really had some bombs he’d get rid of every car in Harlem!’ “

We laughed and I prepared to go.

“Sorry you found me so gloomy today, son. But you know, things have a way of just piling up these days and I just had to talk about them. Anyway, you asked for me to tell you what I thought.”

She walked with me to the door. Streetlamps glowed on the avenue, lighting the early dark. The after-school cries of children drifted dimly in from the sidewalk.

She shivered close beside me. “It’s getting chilly already,” she said. “I’m wondering what’s going to happen this winter about the oil and coal situation. These ole holes we have to live in can get mighty cold. Now can’t they though?”

I agreed.

“A friend of mine that moved up on Amsterdam Avenue about a month ago wanted to know why I don’t move out of Harlem. So I told her it wouldn’t

do no good to move ’cause anywhere they let us go gets to be Harlem right on. I done moved round too much not to know that. Oh yes!”

She shook her head knowingly.

“Harlem’s like that old song says:

It’s so high you can’t get over it

So low, you can’t get under it,

And so wide, you can’t get round it.…

“That’s the way it really is,” she said. “Well, good-bye, son.”

And as I went down the dimmed-out street the verse completed itself in my mind, *You must come through by the living gate.…*

So there you have Mrs. Jackson. And that’s the way “it really is” for her and many like her who are searching for that gate of freedom.

In the very texture of their lives there is confusion, war-made confusion, and the problem is to get around, over, under and through this confusion. They do not ask for a lighter share of necessary war sacri ces than other Americans have to bear. But they do ask for equal reasons to believe that their sacri ces are worthwhile, and they *do* want to be rid of the heavy resentment and bitterness which has been theirs for long before the war.

Forced in normal times to live at standards much lower than those the war has brought to the United States generally, they nd it emotionally di cult to give their attention to the war. The struggle for existence constitutes a war in itself. The Mrs. Jacksons of Harlem o er one of the best arguments for the stabilization of prices and the freezing of rents. Twenty-ve percent of those still on relief come from our ve percent of New York’s population. Mrs. Jackson nds it increasingly di cult to feed her children. She must pay six cents more on the dollar for food than do the mothers of similar-income sections elsewhere in the city. With the prospect of a heatless winter,

Harlem, with its poor housing and high tuberculosis death rate, will know an increase of hardship.

It is an old story. Touch any phase of urban living in our democracy, and its worst aspects are to be found in Harlem. Our housing is the poorest, and our rents the highest. Our people are the sickest, and Harlem Hospital the most overcrowded and understa ed. Our unemployment is the greatest, and our cost of food the most exorbitant. Our crime the most understandable and easily corrected, but the policemen sent among us the most brutal.

Our desire to rid the world of fascism the most burning, and the obstacles placed in our way the most frustrating. Our need to see the war as a struggle between democracy and fascism the most intense, and our temptation to interpret it as a “color” war the most compelling. Our need to believe in the age of the “common man”

the most hope-inspiring, and our reasons to doubt that it will include us the most disheartening. (This is no Whitmanesque

catalogue of democratic exultations, while more than anything else we wish that it could be.) And that’s the way it is.

Many of Mrs. Jackson’s neighbors are joining in the ght to freeze rents and for the broadening of the F.E.C.P. for Negroes and all other Americans. Their very lives demand that they back the President’s stabilization program. That they must be victorious is one of the necessities upon which our democratic freedom rests. The Mrs. Jacksons cannot make the sacri ces necessary to participate in a total war if the conditions under which they live, the very ground on which they must ght, continues its o ensive against them. Nor is this something to be solved by propaganda. Morale grows out of realities, not out of words alone. Only concrete action will be e ective, lest irritation and confusion turn into exasperation, and exasperation change to disgust and nally into anti-war sentiment (and there is such a danger). Mrs. Jackson’s reality must be democratized so that she may clarify her thinking and her emotions.

And that’s the way it really is.

From *New Masses*, October 20, 1942.

Harlem Is Nowhere

ONE must descend to the basement and move along a confusing mazelike hall to reach it. Twice the passage seems to lead to a blank wall; then at last one enters the brightly lighted auditorium. And here, nally, are the social workers at the reception desks, and there, waiting upon the benches in rows beneath the pipes carrying warmth and water to the oors above, are the patients. One sees white-jacketed psychiatrists carrying charts appear and vanish behind screens that form the improvised interviewing cubicles. All is an atmosphere of hurried e ciency, and the concerned faces of the patients are brightened by the friendly smiles and low-pitched voices of the expert workers. One has entered the Lafargue Psychiatric Clinic.

This clinic (whose sta receives no salary and whose fee is only twenty-ve cents—to those who can a ord it) is perhaps the most successful attempt in the nation to provide psychotherapy for the underprivileged. Certainly it has become in two years one of Harlem's most important institutions. Not only is it the sole mental clinic in the section; it is the only center in the city wherein both Negroes and whites may receive extended psychiatric care. Thus its importance transcends even its great value as a center for psychotherapy; it represents an underground extension of democracy.

As one of the few institutions dedicated to recognizing the total implication of Negro life in the United States, the Lafargue Clinic rejects all stereotypes, and may be said to concern itself with any possible variations between the three basic social factors shaping an American Negro's personality: he is viewed as a member of a racial and cultural minority, as an American citizen caught in certain political and economic relationships, and as a modern man living in a revolutionary world. Accordingly, each patient, whether white or

black, is approached dynamically as a being possessing a cultural and biological past who seeks to make his way toward the future in a world wherein each discovery about himself must be made in the here and now at the expense of hope, pain and fear—a being who in responding to the complex forces of America has become confused.

Leaving the Lafargue Clinic for a while, what are some of the forces which generate this confusion? Who is this total Negro whom the clinic seeks to know; what is the psychological character of the scene in which he dwells; how describe the past which he drags into this scene; and what is the future toward which he stumbles and becomes confused? Let us begin with the scene: Harlem.

To live in Harlem is to dwell in the very bowels of the city; it is to pass a labyrinthine existence among streets that explode monotonously skyward with the spires and crosses of churches and clutter underfoot with garbage and decay. Harlem is a ruin; many of its ordinary aspects (its crimes, casual violence, crumbling buildings with littered areaways, ill-smelling halls and vermin-invaded rooms) are indistinguishable from the distorted images that appear in dreams, and which, like muggers haunting a lonely hall, quiver in the waking mind with hidden and threatening signi cance. Yet this is no dream, but the reality of well over four hundred thousand Americans, a reality which for many de nes and colors the world.

Overcrowded and exploited politically and economically, Harlem is the scene and symbol of the Negro's perpetual alienation in the land of his birth.

But much has been written about the social and economic aspects of Harlem; we are here interested in its psychological character, a character that arises from the impact between urban slum conditions and folk sensibilities. Historically, American Negroes are caught in a vast process of change that has swept them from slavery to the condition of industrial man in a space of time so telescoped (a bare eighty-ve years) that it is literally possible for them to step from feudalism into the vortex of industrialism simply by moving across the Mason-Dixon line.

This abruptness of change and the resulting clash of cultural factors within Negro personality account for some of the extreme

contrasts found in Harlem, for both its negative and its positive characteristics. For if Harlem is the scene of the folk-Negro's death agony, it is also the setting of his transcendence. Here it is possible for talented youths to leap through the development of decades in a brief twenty years,

while beside them white-haired adults crawl in the feudal darkness of their childhood. Here a former cotton picker develops the sensitive hands of a surgeon, and men whose grandparents still believe in magic prepare optimistically to become atomic scientists. Here the grandchildren of those who possessed no written literature examine their lives through the eyes of Freud and Marx, Kierkegaard and Kafka, Malraux and Sartre. It explains the nature of a world so uid and shifting that often within the mind the real and the unreal merge, and the marvelous beckons from behind the same sordid reality that denies its existence.

Hence the most surreal fantasies are acted out upon the streets of Harlem; a man ducks in and out of tra c shouting and throwing imaginary grenades that actually exploded during World War I; a boy participates in the rape-robbery of his mother; a man beating his wife in a park uses boxing "science" and observes Marquis of Queensberry rules (no rabbit punching, no blows beneath the belt); two men hold a third while a lesbian slashes him to death with a razor blade; boy gangsters wielding homemade pistols (which in the South of their origin are but toy symbols of adolescent yearning for manhood) shoot down their young rivals. Life becomes a masquerade; exotic costumes are worn every day. Those who cannot a ord to hire a horse wear riding habits; others who could not a ord a hunting trip or who seldom attend sporting events carry shooting sticks.

For this is a world in which the major energy of the imagination goes not into creating works of art, but to overcome the frustrations of social discrimination. Not quite citizens and yet Americans, full of the tensions of modern man but regarded as primitives, Negro Americans are in desperate search for an identity. Rejecting the second-class status assigned them, they feel alienated and their whole lives have become a search for answers to the questions: Who am I, What am I, Why am I, and Where? Signi cantly, in Harlem the

reply to the greeting, "How are you?" is often, "Oh, man, I'm *nowhere*" — a phrase revealing an attitude so common that it has been reduced to a gesture, a seemingly trivial word. Indeed, Negroes are not unaware that the conditions of their lives demand new de nitions of terms like *primitive* and

modem, ethical and *unethical, moral* and *immoral, patriotism* and *treason, tragedy* and *comedy, sanity* and *insanity*.

But for a long time now—despite songs like the “Blow Top Blues”

and the eruption of expressions like *frantic*, *buggy* and *mad* into Harlem’s popular speech, doubtless a word-magic against the states they name—calm in the face of the unreality of Negro life has become increasingly di cult. And while some seek relief in strange hysterical forms of religion, in alcohol and drugs, and others learn to analyze the causes for their predicament and join with others to correct them, an increasing number have found their way to the Lafargue Psychiatric Clinic.

In relation to their Southern background, the cultural history of Negroes in the North reads like the legend of some tragic people out of mythology, a people who aspired to escape from its own unhappy homeland to the apparent peace of a distant mountain, but who, in migrating, made some fatal error of judgment and fell into a great chasm of mazelike passages that promise ever to lead to the mountain but ever end against a wall. Not that a Negro is worse o in the North than in the South, but that in the North he surrenders and does not replace certain important supports to his personality.

He leaves a relatively static social order in which, having experienced its brutality for hundreds of years—indeed, having been formed within it and by it—he has developed those techniques of survival which Faulkner refers to as “endurance,” and an ease of movement within explosive situations which makes Hemingway’s de nition of courage, “grace under pressure,” appear mere swagger.

He surrenders the protection of his peasant cynicism—his refusal to hope for the ful llment of hopeless hopes—and his sense of being

“at home in the world” gained from confronting and accepting (for day-to-day living, at least) the obscene absurdity of his predicament.

Further, he leaves a still authoritative religion which gives his life a

semblance of metaphysical wholeness, a family structure which is relatively stable, and a body of folklore—tested in life-and-death terms against his daily experience with nature and the Southern white man—that serves him as a guide to action.

These are the supports of Southern Negro rationality (and, to an extent, of the internal peace of the United States); humble, but of inestimable psychological value, * they allow Southern Negroes to maintain their almost mystical hope for a future of full democracy, a hope accompanied by an irrepressible belief in some Mecca of equality located in the North and identi ed by the magic place names New York, Chicago, Detroit. A belief sustained (as all myth is sustained by ritual) by identifying themselves ritually with the successes of Negro celebrities, by reciting their exploits and enumerating their dollars, and by recounting the swiftness with which they spiral from humble birth to headline fame. And doubtless the blasting of this dream is as damaging to Negro personality as the slum scenes of lth, disorder and crumbling masonry in which it ies apart.

When Negroes are barred from participating in the main institutional life of society, they lose far more than economic privileges or the satisfaction of saluting the ag with unmixed emotions. They lose one of the bulwarks which men place between themselves and the constant threat of chaos. For whatever the assigned function of social institutions, their psychological function is to protect the citizen against the irrational, incalculable forces that hover about the edges of human life like cosmic destruction lurking within an atomic stockpile. And it is precisely the denial of this support through segregation and discrimination that leaves the most balanced Negro open to anxiety.

Though caught not only in the tensions arising from his own swift history, but in those con icts created in modern man by a revolutionary world, the Negro cannot participate fully in the therapy which the white American achieves through patriotic ceremonies and by identifying himself with American wealth and power. Instead, he is thrown back upon his own “slum-shocked”

institutions.

But these, like his folk personality, are caught in a process of chaotic change. His family disintegrates, his church splinters, his folk wisdom is discarded in the mistaken notion that it in no way applies to urban living, and his formal education (never really his own) provides him with neither scienti c description nor rounded philosophical interpretation of the profound forces that are transforming his total being. Yet even his art is transformed; the lyrical ritual elements of folk jazz—that artistic projection of the only real individuality possible for him in the South, that embodiment of a superior democracy in which each individual cultivated his uniqueness and yet did not clash with his neighbors—

have given way to the near-themeless technical virtuosity of bebop, a further triumph of technology over humanism. His speech hardens, his movements are geared to the time clock, his diet changes, his sensibilities quicken and his intelligence expands. But without institutions to give him direction, and lacking a clear explanation of his predicament—the religious ones being inadequate, and those o ered by political and labor leaders obviously incomplete and opportunistic—the individual feels that his world and his personality are out of key. The phrase “I’m nowhere” expresses the feeling borne in upon many Negroes that they have no stable, recognized place in society. One’s identity drifts in a capricious reality in which even the most commonly held assumptions are questionable. One “is” literally, but one is nowhere; one wanders dazed in a ghetto maze, a “displaced person” of American democracy.

And as though all this were not enough of a strain on a people’s sense of the rational, the conditions under which they live are seized upon as proof of their inferiority. Thus the frustrations of Negro life (many of them the frustrations of *all* life during this historical moment) permeate the atmosphere of Harlem with what Dr.

Frederick Wertham, Director of the Lafargue Clinic, terms “free-oating hostility,” a hostility that bombards the individual from so many directions that he is often unable to identify it with any speci c object. Some feel it the punishment of some racial or personal guilt and pray to God; others (called “evil Negroes” in

Harlem) become enraged with the world. Sometimes it provokes dramatic mass responses, and the results are the spontaneous outbreaks called the “Harlem riots” of 1935 and 1943.

And why have these explosive matters, which are now a problem of our foreign policy, been ignored? Because there is an argument in progress between black men and white men as to the true nature of American reality. Following their own interests, whites impose interpretations upon Negro experience that are not only false but, in e ect, a denial of Negro humanity (witness the shock when A. Philip Randolph questions, on the basis of Negro experience, the meaning of *treason)*. Too weak to shout down these interpretations, Negroes live nevertheless as they have to live, and the concrete conditions of their lives are more real than white men’s arguments.

And it is here exactly that lies the importance of the Lafargue Psychiatric Clinic, both as a scienti c laboratory and as an expression of forthright democratic action in its scienti c willingness to dispense with preconceived notions and accept the realities of Negro—i.e., *American*—life. It recognizes that the personality damage that brought it into being represents not the disintegration of a people’s ber, but the failure of a way of life. For not only is it an antidote to this failure, but it represents a victory over another of its aspects.

For ten years, while heading various psychiatric institutions, Dr.

Wertham had fought for a psychiatric center in which Negroes could receive treatment. But whether he approached politicians, city agencies or philanthropists, all gave excuses for not acting. T he agencies were complacent; the politicians accused him of harboring political rather than humanitarian motives; certain liberal middlemen, who stand between Negroes and philanthropic dollars, accused him of trying to establish a segregated institution. Finally it was decided to establish the clinic without money or o cial recognition. The results were electric. When his fellow psychiatrists were asked to contribute their services, Dr. Wertham was overwhelmed with o ers. These physicians, all of whom hold jobs in institutions which discriminate against Negroes, were eager to overcome this frustration to their science, and like some Southern

Negroes who consider that part of themselves best which they hide beneath their servility, they consider their most important work that which is carried out in a Harlem basement.

Here, in the basement, a frustrated science goes to nd its true object: the confused of mind who seek reality. Both nd the source of their frustrations in the sickness of the social order. As such, and in spite of the very ne work it is doing, a thousand Lafargue clinics could not dispel the sense of unreality that haunts Harlem. Knowing this, Dr. Wertham and his interracial sta seek a modest achievement: to give each bewildered patient an insight into the relation between his problems and his environment, and out of this understanding to reforge the will to endure in a hostile world.

Unpublished. Written for *Magazine of the Year*, 1948.

*Its political and economic value is the measure of both the positive and negative

characteristics of American democracy.

An American Dilemma:

A Review

GUNNAR MYRDAL'S *An American Dilemma* is not an easy book for an American Negro to review. Not because he might be overawed by its broad comprehensiveness; nor because of the sense of alienation and embarrassment that the book might arouse by reminding him that it is necessary in our democracy for a European scientist to a rm the American Negro's humanity; not even because it is an implied criticism of his own Negro social scientists' failure to de ne the problem as clearly. Instead, it is di cult because the book, as a study of a social ambiguity, is itself so nearly ambiguous that in order to appreciate it fully and yet protect his own humanity, the Negro must, while joining in the chorus of "Yeas" which the book has so deservedly evoked, utter a lusty and simultaneous "Nay."

In our society it is not unusual for a Negro to experience a sensation that he does not exist in the real world at all. He seems, rather, to exist in the

nightmarish fantasy of the white American mind as a phantom that the white mind seeks unceasingly, by means both crude and subtle, to lay to rest. Myrdal proves this no idle Negro fancy. He locates the Negro problem "in the heart of the

[white] American … the con ict between his moral valuations on various levels of consciousness and generality." Indeed, the main virtue of *An American Dilemma* lies in its demonstration of how the mechanism of prejudice operates to disguise the moral con ict in the minds of whites produced by the clash on the social level between the American Creed and anti-Negro practices. There is, however, a danger in this very virtue.

For the solution of the problem of the American Negro and democracy lies only partially in the white man's free will. Its full solution will lie in the creation of a democracy in which the Negro

will be free to de ne himself for what he is and, within the large framework of that democracy, for what he desires to be. Let this not be misunderstood. For one is apt, in welcoming *An American Dilemma's* democratic contribution, to forget that all great democratic documents—and there is a certain greatness here—

contain a strong charge of antidemocratic elements. Perhaps the wisest attitude for democrats is not to deplore the ambiguous element of democratic writings, but to seek to understand them. For it is by making use of the positive contributions of such documents and rejecting their negative elements that democracy can be kept dynamic.

Since its inception, American social science has been closely bound with American Negro destiny. Even before the Civil War the Southern ruling class had inspired a pseudoscienti c literature attempting to prove the Negro inhuman and thus beyond any moral objections to human slavery. Sociology did not become closely concerned with the Negro, however, until after Emancipation gave the slaves the status—on paper at least—of nominal citizens. And if the end of the slave system created for this science the pragmatic problem of adjusting our society to include the new citizens, the compromise between the Northern and Southern ruling classes created the moral problem which Myrdal terms the American Dilemma.

This was a period, the 1870s, wherein scienti c method, with its supposed objectivity and neutrality to values, was thought to be the answer to all problems. There is no better example of the confusion and opportunism springing from this false assumption than the relation of American social science to the Negro problem. And let us make no easy distinctions here between Northern and Southern social scientists; both groups used their graphs, charts and other paraphernalia to prove the Negro's biological, psychological, intellectual and moral inferiority, one group to justify the South's exploitation of Negroes, and the other to justify the North's refusal to do anything basic about it. Here was a science whose role,

beneath its illusionary non-concern with values, was to reconcile the practical morality of American capitalism with the ideal morality of the American Creed.

Now, the task of reconciling moralities is usually the function of religion and philosophy, of art and psychoanalysis—all of which nd mythmaking indispensable. And in this, American sociological literature rivals all three, its mythmaking consisting of its

"scienti c" justi cation of antidemocratic and unscienti c racial attitudes and practices. If Myrdal has done nothing else, he has used his science to discredit all of the vicious non-scienti c nonsense that has cluttered our sociological literature. He has, in short, shorn it of its mythology.

It is rewarding to trace the connection between social science and the Negro a bit further. Usually when the condition of Negroes is discussed we get a morality-play explanation in which the North is given the role of good and the South that of evil. This oversimpli es a complex matter. For at the end of the Civil War, the North lost interest in the Negro. The conditions for the growth of industrial capitalism had been won and, according to Myrdal, the Negro

"stood in the way of a return to national solidarity and a development of trade relations" between the North and the South.

This problem was not easy to solve. Groups of Negroes had discovered the e ectiveness of protest and what Myrdal shows to be the Negro's strongest

weapon in pressing his claims: his hold upon the moral consciousness of Northern whites.

In order to deal with this problem the North did four things: it promoted Negro education in the South; it controlled his economic and political destiny, or allowed the South to do so; it built Booker T. Washington into a national spokesman of Negroes with Tuskegee Institute as his seat of power; and it organized social science as an instrumentality to sanction its methods.

It might be said that this explanation sounds too cynical, that much of the North's interest in Negro education grew out of a philanthropic impulse, and that it ignores the real contribution to

the understanding of Negroes made by social science. But philanthropy on the psychological level is often guilt-motivated, even when most unconscious. And here, again, we have the moral con ict. When we look at the connection between Tuskegee and our most in uential school of sociology, the University of Chicago, we are inclined to see more than an unconscious connection between economic interests and philanthropy, Negroes and social science.

But if on the black side of the color line Washington's "Tuskegee Machine" served to de ect Negro energy away from direct political action, on the white side of the line the moral problem nevertheless remained. It does not, therefore, seem quite accidental that the man responsible for in ating Tuskegee into a national symbol, and who is sometimes spoken of as the "power behind Washington's throne,"

was none other than Dr. Robert E. Park, co-founder of the University of Chicago School of Sociology.

The positive contributions of Dr. Park and those men connected with him are well established. American Negroes have bene ted greatly from their research, and some of the most brilliant of Negro scholars have been connected with them. Perhaps the most just charge to be made against them is that of timidity. They have been, in the negative sense, victims of the imposed limitations of bourgeois science. Because certainly their recent

works have moved closer and closer toward the conclusions made by Myrdal. Indeed, without their active participation, *An American Dilemma* would have been far less e ective. Nevertheless, it was Myrdal who made the most of their ndings. Perhaps it took the rise of fascism to free American social science of its timidity. Certainly it was necessary to clear it of some of the anti-Negro assumptions with which it started.

Dr. Robert E. Park was both a greater scientist and, in his attitude toward Negroes, a greater democrat than William Graham Sumner.

(It will perhaps pain many to see these names in juxtaposition.) In our world, however, extremes quickly meet. Sumner believed it “the greatest folly of which man can be capable to sit down with a slate and pencil and plan out a new social world,” a point of view containing little hope for the underdog. But for all his good works, some of Park’s assumptions were little better. The Negro, he felt,

“has always been interested rather in expression than in action; interested in life itself rather than in its reconstruction or reformation. The Negro is, by natural disposition, neither an intellectual nor an idealist, like the Jew; nor a brooding introspective, like the East Indian; nor a pioneer and frontiersman, like the Anglo-Saxon. He is primarily an artist, loving life for its own sake. His *métier* is expression rather than action. He is, so to speak, the lady among the races.”

Park’s descriptive metaphor is so pregnant with mixed motives as to birth a thousand compromises and indecisions. Imagine the e ect such teachings have had upon Negro students alone! Thus what started as part of a democratic attitude, ends not only uncomfortably close to the preachings of Sumner, but to those of Dr.

Goebbels as well.

One becomes impatient with those critics who accuse American capitalism of neglecting social planning. Actually its planning lay in having the loosest plan possible, and when it was economically expedient to change plans it has been able to do so. During the Abolitionist period the moral nature of the Negro problem was generally recognized, but with the passing of the

Reconstruction the moral aspect was forced out of consciousness. Signi cantly, Booker T. Washington wrote a biography in which he deliberately gave the *coup de grâce* to the memory of Frederick Douglass, the Negro leader who, in his aggressive career, united the moral and political factions for the anti-slavery struggle.

Following World War I, under the war-stimulated revival of democracy, there was a brief moment when the moral nature of the problem threatened to come alive in the minds of white Americans.

This time it was rationalized by projecting into popular ction the stereotype of the Negro as an exotic primitive, while social science, under the pressure of war production needs, was devoted to proving that Negroes were not so inferior as a few decades before. It was during this period that some of the most scienti cally valid concepts for understanding the Negro were advanced. But social science did

not have the courage of its own research. Following its vital Jamesian in uence it began to discover the questionable values it supported and, until Myrdal arrived, timidly held its breath. Why, then, should Myrdal be brought into the country in 1937 by the Carnegie Foundation to prepare this study and not before? Why this sudden junking of ideological xtures?

According to F. P. Keppel, who writes the foreword for the trustees of the Carnegie Corporation: “The underlying purpose of these studies is to contribute to the general advancement and di usion of knowledge and understanding.” There was, Mr. Keppel admits, another reason, namely “the need of the foundation itself for fuller light in the formulation and development of its own program.”

Former Secretary of War Newton D. Baker, target of much Negro discontent over the treatment of Negro soldiers during the last war, suggested the study, and the board agreed with him that “more knowledge and better organized and interrelated knowledge [of the Negro problem] were essential before the Corporation could intelligently distribute its own funds,” and that “the gathering and digestion of the material might well have a usefulness far beyond our own needs.”

These, we must admit, are all good reasons, although a bit vague.

One thing, however, is clear: a need was felt for a new ideological approach to the Negro problem. This need was general, and if we look for a moment at those two groups—the left-wing parties and the New Deal—that showed the greatest concern with the Negro problem during the period between the Depression and the outbreak of the war, we are able to see how the need expressed itself.

Both the Left and the New Deal showed a far less restrained approach to the Negro than any groups since the Abolitionists. The Left brought the world view of Marxism into the Negro community, introduced new techniques of organization and struggle, and included the Negro in its program on a basis of equality. Within its far more rigid framework the New Deal moved in the same democratic direction. Nevertheless, for all their activity, both groups

neglected sharp ideological planning where the Negro was concerned. Both, it might be said, went about solving the Negro problem without de ning the nature of the problem beyond its economic and narrowly political aspects. Which is not unusual for politicians, only here both groups consistently professed and demonstrated far more social vision than the average political party.

The most striking example of this failure is to be seen in the New Deal administration’s perpetuation of a Jim Crow army, and the shamefaced support of it given by the Communists. It would be easy

—on the basis of some of the slogans attributed to Negro people by the Communists from time to time, and the New Deal’s frequent retreats on Negro issues—to question the sincerity of these two groups. Or, in the case of the New Deal, to attribute its failure to its desire to hold power in a concrete political situation, while the failure of the Communists could be laid to “Red per dy.” But this would be silly. Sincerity is not a quality that one expects of political parties, not even revolutionary ones. To question their sincerity makes room for the old idea of paternalism, and the corny notion that these groups have an obligation to “do something *for* the Negro.”

The only sincerity to be expected of political parties is that exible variety whereby they are enabled to put their own programs into e ect. Regardless of their long-range intentions, on the practical level they are guided not by humanism as much as by expediencies of power. Thus if there is any insincerity here, it lies in the failure of these groups to make the best of their own interests by basing their alliances with Negroes upon a more scienti c knowledge of the subtleties of Negro-white relations.

Dismissing the New Deal point of view as the eclectic creation of a capitalism in momentary retreat, what was in uencing the Communists, who emphasized the unity of theory and practice?

This, we believe, sprang from their inheritance of the American Dilemma (which, incidentally disproves the Red-baiters' charge that left-wingers are alien). Despite its projection of a morality based upon Marxist internationalism, it had inherited the moral problem

centering upon the Negro which Myrdal nds in the very tissue of American thinking. And while we disagree with Myrdal's assumption that the psychological barrier between black and white workers is relatively rigid—their cooperation in unions and war plants disproves this—he has done the Left a service in pointing out that there *is* a psychological problem which in this country requires special attention.

For in our culture the problem of the irrational, that blind spot in our knowledge of society where Marx cries out for Freud and Freud for Marx, but where approaching, both grow wary and shout insults lest they actually meet, has taken the form of the Negro problem.

In Europe it was the fascists who made the manipulation of myth and symbol a vital part of their political technology. But here at home, it was only the Southern ruling class that showed a similar skill for psychology and ideological manipulation. By contrast, the planning of the Northern ruling groups in relation to the South and the Negro has always presented itself as nonplanning and philanthropy on the surface, and as sociological theory underneath.

Until the Depression the industrial and social isolationism of the South was felt to o er the broadest possibility for business exploitation. But attempts at national economic recovery proved this idea outdated; Northern capital could no longer turn its head while the Southern ruling group went its regressive way. Hence the New Deal's assault upon the ignorance and backwardness of the Southern

"one-third of a nation." There was a vague recognition that the economic base of American capitalism had become dislocated from its ideological superstructure. However, the nation, so technologically advanced and scienti cally alert, showed itself amazingly backward in creating or borrowing techniques to bring these two aspects of social reality into focus. Not that the nature of the problem was not understood. Writers ranging from Earl Browder, to Max Lerner, to the New Deal braintrusters had a lot to say about it. Lerner especially emphasized the technological and psychological nature of the problem, stressed the neutrality of techniques, and suggested learning even from the Nazis, if necessary. But for the most part, both New Deal and the o cial Left

concentrated more upon the economic aspects of the problem, important though they were, than upon those points where economic and psychological pressures con icted.

There is a certain ironic ttingness about the fact that these volumes, prepared with the streamlined thoroughness of a *Fortune* magazine survey, and o ering the most detailed documentation of the American Negro's humanity yet to appear, should come sponsored by a leading capitalist group. I say this grudgingly, for here the pro t motive of the Right—clothed, it is true, in the guilt-dress of philanthropy—has proven more resourceful, imaginative and aware of its own best interests than the overcautious socialism of the Left. Not that we expect the Left to have at its disposal the funds—some $300,000—that went into the preparation of this elaborate study. But it has failed even to *state* the problem in such broadly human terms, or with that cultural sophistication and social insight springing from Marxist theory, which, backed by passion and courage, has allowed the Left in other countries to deal more creatively with reality than the Right, and to overcome the Right's advantages of institutionalized power and erudition.

The reviewers have made much of Dr. Myrdal's being a foreigner, imported to do the study as one who had no emotional stake in the American Dilemma. And while this had undoubtedly aided his objectivity, the extent of it is apt to be overplayed.

The whole setting is dramatic. A young scholar-scientist of international reputation, a banker, economic adviser to the Swedish government and a member of the Swedish senate, is invited by one of the wealthiest groups in the United States to come in and publicly air its soiled democratic linen. Bearing this set of circumstances in mind while we consider the writing problem faced by Myrdal, we can see how the various social and economic factors which we have discussed come to bear upon his book.

First, Myrdal had to delve into those areas of the American mind most charged with emotion; he had to question his hosts' motivation and present his ndings in such a way that his hosts would not be

too o ended. He had also to tell the South some unpleasant things about itself; he had to present facts unacceptable to certain reactionary sections of the capitalist class, and, in the words of Mr.

Keppel, he had, "since the emotional factor a ects Negroes no less than whites," to present his material in such a manner as not to

"lessen the con dence of the Negroes in the United States."

And when we consider the great ideological struggle raging since the Depression, between the Left and the Right, we see an even further problem for the author: a problem of style, which fades over into a problem of interpretation. It also points to the real motivation for the work: An American Dilemma *is the blueprint for a more e ective exploitation of the South's natural, industrial and human resources*. We use the term "exploitation" in both the positive and negative sense. In the positive sense it is the key to a more democratic and fruitful usage of the South's natural and human resources; in the negative, it is the plan for a more e cient and subtle manipulation of black and white relations, especially in the South.

In interpreting the results of this ve-year study, Myrdal found that it con rmed many of the social and economic assumptions of the Left, and throughout the book he has felt it necessary to carry on a running battle with Marxism. Especially irritating to him has been the concept of class struggle and the economic motivation of anti-Negro prejudice which to an increasing number of Negro intellectuals correctly analyzes their situation:

As we look upon the problem of dynamic social causation, this approach is unrealistic and narrow. We do not, of course, deny that the conditions under which Negroes are allowed to earn a living are tremendously important for their welfare. But these conditions are closely interrelated to all other conditions of Negro life. When studying the variegated causes of discrimination in the labor market, it is, indeed, di cult to perceive what precisely is meant by "the economic factor.…" In an interdependent system of dynamic causation there is no "primary cause" but everything is cause *to* everything else.

To which one might answer, "Only if you throw out the class struggle." All this, of course, avoids the question of power *and* the question of who manipulates that power. Which to us seems more of a stylistic maneuver than a scienti c judgment. For those concepts Myrdal substitutes what he terms a "cumulative principle" or

"vicious circle." And like Ezekiel's wheels in the Negro spiritual, one of which ran "by faith" and the other "by the grace of God," this vicious circle has no earthly prime mover. It "just turns."

L. D. Reddick has pointed out that Myrdal tends to use history simply as background and not as a functioning force in current society. And we see this as one with Myrdal's refusal to locate the American *ethos* in terms of its material manifestations, or to point out how it is manipulated, although he makes it the basis of his stylistic appeal. It is unlikely in this mechanist-minded culture that such a powerful force would go "unused."

Myrdal's stylistic method is admirable. In presenting his ndings he uses the American *ethos* brilliantly to disarm all American social groupings by appealing to their stake in the American Creed, and to locate the psychological barriers between them. But he also uses it to deny the

existence of an American class struggle, and with facile economy it allows him to avoid admitting that actually there exist *two* American moralities, kept in balance by social science.

The limitations of Myrdal's vision of American democracy do not lie vague and misty beyond the horizon of history. They can be easily discerned through the Negro perspective.

Myrdal's study of the Negro is, in comparison with others, microscopic. Here, to name only a few aspects, we nd analyses of Negro institutions, class groupings, family organization, economic problems, race theories and prejudices, the Negro press, church and leadership. Some of the insights are brilliant, especially those through which he demonstrates how many Negro personality traits, said to be "innate," are socially conditioned, even to types of Negro laughter and vocal intonation. But with all this he can only conclude that "the Negro's entire life and, consequently, also his opinions on

the Negro problem are, in the main, to be considered as secondary reactions to more primary pressures from the side of the dominant white majority."

But can a people (its faith in an idealized American Creed notwithstanding) live and develop for over three hundred years simply by *reacting?* Are American Negroes simply the creation of white men, or have they at least helped to create themselves out of what they found around them? Men have made a way of life in caves and upon cli s; why cannot Negroes have made a life upon the horns of the white man's dilemma?

Myrdal sees Negro culture and personality simply as the product of a "social pathology." Thus he assumes that "it is to the advantage of American Negroes as individuals and as a group to become assimilated into American culture, to acquire the traits held in esteem by the dominant white Americans." This, he admits, contains the value premise that *"here in America,* American culture is 'highest'

in the pragmatic sense.…" Which, aside from implying that Negro culture is not also American, assumes that Negroes should desire nothing better than what whites consider highest. But in the

“pragmatic sense” lynching and Hollywood, fadism and radio advertising are products of the “higher” culture, and the Negro might ask, “Why, if my culture is pathological, must I exchange it for these?”

It does not occur to Myrdal that many of the Negro cultural manifestations which he considers merely re ective might also embody a *rejection* of what he considers “higher values.” There is a dualism at work here. It is only partially true that Negroes turn away from white patterns because they are refused participation.

There is nothing like distance to create objectivity, and exclusion gives rise to counter values. Men, as Dostoevsky observed, cannot live in revolt. Nor can they live in a state of “reacting.” It will take a deeper science than Myrdal’s, deep as that might be, to analyze what is happening among the masses of Negroes. Much of it is inarticulate, and Negro scholars have for the most part ignored it through clinging, as does Myrdal, to the sterile concept of “race.”

Much of Negro culture might be negative, but there is also much of great value and richness, which, because it has been secreted by living and has made their lives more meaningful, Negroes will not willingly disregard.

What is needed in our country is not an exchange of pathologies, but a change of the basis of society. This is a job which both Negroes and whites must perform together. In Negro culture there is much of value for America as a whole. What is needed are Negroes to take it and create of it “the uncreated consciousness of their race.” In doing so they will do far more; they will help create a more human American.

Certainly it would be unfair to expect Dr. Myrdal to see what Negro scholars and most American social scientists have failed to see. After all, like most of its predecessors, *An American Dilemma* has a special social role. And while we do not quarrel with it on these grounds necessarily, let us see it clearly for what it is. Its positive contribution is certainly greater at this time than those negative elements—hence its uncritical reception. The time element is important. For this period of democratic resurgence created by the war, *An American Dilemma* justi es the desire of many groups to see a more democratic approach to the Negro. The military phase of the war

will not, however, last forever. It is then that this study might be used for less democratic purposes. Fortunately its facts are to an extent neutral. This is a cue for liberal intellectuals to get busy to see that *An American Dilemma* does not become an instrument of an American tragedy.

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WORKING NOTES FOR *INVISIBLE MAN*

Sometime after beginning Invisible Man *in 1945, Ellison composed these undated notes. They show him grounding his metaphor of invisibility in the American Negro experience—"out of this con ict personalities of extreme complexity emerge. "The notes point toward the deepening evolution of Invisible Mans personality in the nished novel. Found in his papers, this selection from the "Working Notes" appears in print here for the rst time*.

Included in this Modern Library Paperback Classics edition of the Collected Essays *is Section II of the "Working Notes. "Here Ellison sketched the plot of the novel after his eponymous narrator-protagonist goes to New York. Ellison's comments illustrate his preliminary thinking about Invisible Man's life, fate, and attitude—*

thinking that evolved and changed signi cantly during some six years of composition.

FIRST a couple of underlying assumptions: "Invisibility," as our rather strange character comes in the end to conceive it, springs from two basic facts of American life: from the racial conditioning which often makes the white American interpret cultural, physical, or psychological di erences as signs of racial inferiority; and, on the other hand, it springs from a great formlessness of Negro life wherein all values are in ux, and where those institutions and patterns of life which mold the white American's personality are missing or not so immediate in their e ect. Except for its upper levels, where it tends to merge with the American whole, Negro life is a world psychologically apart. Its tempo of development from the feudal-folk forms of the South to the industrial urban forms of the North is so rapid that it throws up personalities as uid and changeable as molten metal rendered iridescent from the e ect of cooling air. Its class lines are uid, its

values unstable, and it is in con ict with the white world to which it is bound. Out of this con ict personalities of extreme complexity emerge, personalities which in a short span of years move from the level of the folk to that of the sophisticate, who combine enough potential forms of Western personality to ll many lives, and who are “broad” in the sense of which Ivan Karamazov spoke. Sometimes in responding to the con ict between their place in life as Negroes and the opportunities of America which are denied them, these personalities act out their wildest fantasies; they assume many guises without too much social opposition (Father Divine becomes God) rst because within the Negro world the necessities of existence, those compromises men must make in order to survive, are such that they do not allow for a too rigid de ning of value or personality (only the lower-class Negroes create their own values, the middle class seeks to live up to those of the whites); second, because whites tend to regard Negroes in the spirit of the old song “All Coons Look Alike to Me,” seldom looking past the abstraction “Negro” to the speci c

“man.” Thus a Negro is rendered invisible—and to an extent invincible when he, as our hero comes to do, attempts to take advantage of the white man’s psychological blind spot. And even

this involves a sacri ce of personality and manhood on the Negro’s part, and many of his actions are motivated by spite and an e ort to revenge himself against this scheme of things.

The other thing to be said about our character speci cally is that he is a man born into a tragic irrational situation who attempts to respond to it as though it were completely logical. He has accepted the de nition of himself handed down by the white South and the paternalism of northern philanthropy. He sets out with the purpose of succeeding within the tight framework granted him by jim crow, and he blinds himself to all those factors of reality which reveal the essential inadequacy of such a scheme for the full development of personality.

Ironically, he also represents the Negro individualist, the personality that breaks away from the pre-individual community of southern Negro life to win its way in the jim crow world by guile, uncletomming, or ruthlessness. In order to do this he must act within the absurd predicament in which

Negroes nd themselves upon the assumption that all is completely logical. Against the tragic-comic attitude adopted by folk Negroes (best expressed by the blues and in our scheme by Trueblood) he is strictly, during the rst phase of his life, of the nineteenth century. Thus neither he nor Mr.

Norton, whose abolitionist father's creation he is, can respond to Trueblood's stoicism, or to the Vet's need to get close to the naked essence of the world as he has come to see it. Life is either tragic or absurd, but Norton and the boy have no capacity to deal with such ambivalence. The boy would appease the gods; it costs him much pain to discover that he can satisfy the gods only by rebelling against them. Invisible man has dedicated himself to a false dream but one that has been presented couched in the form of the great rituals of human hope, such as Barbee with a semi-folk evocation of the Founder—mocked by time and reality in the very process —

attempts to manipulate in his address to the student body. It is this hope which gives Invisible Man's quest any semblance of dignity.

SECTION II OUTLINE

I. When the boy attempts to contact the gentlemen to whom his letters are addressed he is given the run-around by each. They remain mysterious and powerful gures who control his destiny but whose desires, though he is willing to do anything to ful l them, he can never discern. Finally, it is the secretary of the seventh trustee who out of some vague impulse of pity reveals to him the contents of one of the letters signed by Bledsoe, the message states in pious terms the equivalent of “Keep this nigger moving.”

His action is one of disbelief. He accuses the secretary of plotting to prevent his getting the job. Returning to his room he su ers the rst real doubts of his life.

After waiting for several weeks he nally accepts the truth that the secretary has revealed.

II. The experience is such that combined with the tempo of the city life and the inadequacy of the heavy southern foods which he has continued to eat, he su ers a severe attack of nervous indigestion. His stomach goes completely dead. Rushed to the hospital he is seized by a group of medical pragmatists and thrown into a mysterious experimental machine which achieves its cure by giving its victim rhythmical electrical shocks and ashing strobe lights in his eyes. At the expense of much pain he is cured and leaves with only a mild case of photo-phobia which leaves him within a few days. The hospital experience is really a form of rebirth and the trauma comes with the physical e ect very much like that he experienced on the charged carpet after the Battle Royal. After this he selects a diet more in keeping with the tensions of the city and begins to note within himself the psychosomatic changes undergone by southern Negroes when they adapt to the life of the city. His sensibilities quicken, his emotions expand and deepen, his curiosity grows, he discovers that he has been afraid and thus loses some of his fear. Having given up hope of succeeding along the lines laid out at the college he is deep in despair. He searches for work. In the swirling life around him he feels his personality slipping away.

III. He lives for a while with a family that has only recently moved to the North which is having a di cult time adjusting but going about it courageously. Under the blasting pressures of the city he sees members of the family involved in matters as tragic as those he discovered in Trueblood yet he is still unable to appreciate what is involved.

IV. He has his second a air with a girl. (Omitted from the rst section is an a air which ends in failure when he approaches a folkish girl with a version of romantic

love which he has gleaned from his reading. She is amused at his antics and rejects him.)

v. He becomes aware of the depression and the agitation for relief. Still desiring to become a leader and still compelled to make speeches, he stops one afternoon to watch an eviction and gives way to an impulse, makes an impassioned speech which incites the spectators to replace the evicted furniture in de ance of the police and to join in a march which threatens to become a riot. Though completely shocked by the force that he has unleashed he courageously accepts the results of his act and moves along in its sway. Suddenly he nds himself acclaimed a hero and taken up by a group of left wingers. They ask him to join them and he does; not because he believes, but because they ask him during his moment of deepest despair.

He now nds that he has been given an identity, a salary, and a great deal of prestige. He is spoken of as a leader, which he takes quite seriously, and he sets out in all sincerity to lead; reading, talking with people, working out ways to win their support. He is convinced that he has found a real democracy, and though somewhat suspicious of whites with whom he has to work he is willing to try. After a while, however, he nds that very few of his suggestions receive consideration and that he is a leader in name but not in fact.

VI. It is here that his sense of invisibility descends full upon him. He decides to resign and make a scandal. Then he begins to think of the whites as the all-powerful gures he regarded them in the South and gives in to his passive drives. Once more he looks for a sphere of action in which is own self-assertion is unnecessary, and self-de nition uncalled for. He fails to see

that he is dealing with well-meaning but blundering human beings, most of whom have misunderstood him because of the unconscious assumption that they knew what was best. His sense that he is losing a grip on himself grows. He phones his o ce several times a day to ask for himself, disguising his voice and nding reassurance in hearing the girl use his title when explaining that he isn't in.

He feels resentment against his colleagues which he expresses by making as many conquests with the women as he can. This is no solution however since he cannot allow husbands to know. He is disappointed when one discovers him and decides in the interest of politics to ignore it. The a ect is humiliating for the Invisible Man who would have regarded a divorce proceedings as evidence of his visibility. He becomes so insecure that he is never at peace unless he is treated as an inferior.

Thus in a democratic organization he feels at peace only when the patterns of American race etiquette are suddenly observed. Yet, he is aware of his own sensitivity and intelligence and resents the power of his white colleagues over him.

VII. In this state he meets Louise, a young woman of great charm. Louise is the one person in the organization whom he can believe accepts him as a human being. He regards her as a symbol of democracy, of freedom and fertility which he can win only by accepting the task of de ning himself against the opposition of the world.

However, he is not sure whether he is attracted to L ouise for herself or for her whiteness. Her whiteness is quite a problem. He is proud of it and he hates it. He receives pleasure from the resentment of those who object when they walk down the street. He is also afraid of the danger which he feels this involves and insists that she spend long hours beneath the sunlamp baking her complexion painfully close to that of a mulatto. Like Othello, whose situation he now parodies, he cannot accept himself nor believe that anyone like Louise could nd him attractive.

Finally, to end his con ict he drives her away.

VIII. Seeking a substitute for Louise and a milieu in which his self-doubts would not be so pressing he begins to travel in sophisticated Harlem circles in which he is accepted as a leader. Ironically, his leadership is now almost entirely on paper, since all those actions which might have allowed him to build a real following have been vetoed downtown. He tells himself that he travels in this crowd in order to in uence it politically, actually he is drawn to its values and to its forms of disintegration. On the other hand, he ruthlessly expels a group of Negroes critical of some of the organization's policies. He closes his mind to the real shortcomings.

Then an admirer presents him with a primitive African fertility god, an ugly little gure which he imagines argues with him concerning the esthetics of democracy.

XI. Riot. A riot, which he has seen developing and sought to point out only to be ignored, occurs. He had been told that he should not attempt to make predictions.

Then when riot occurs he is ordered into the streets to use his prestige and following to persuade the rioters to return to their homes. Knowing full well that no one will listen to him, he ventures out and is attacked by some of the same people who had followed him at the beginning of his political career. He is badly beaten, escapes into a decaying building and nally gets away by running into the deepest level of the basement and hiding in the coal bin and emerges from the coal shute in the center of the sidewalk, covered with dirt and blackness, completely unrecognizable as the once suave politico. His political personality is dismembered.

X. He moves to another part of the city full of resentment. He decides to become a preacher, the leader of a cult. Has noticed the appeal which the redeemed criminal holds for folk Negroes announcing himself as such. He becomes the leader of a small store-front church into which he introduced technological gadgets as a means of exploiting the congregation—recording machines, P.A. systems, electric guitars, swing orchestras are all introduced. At this point he embraces his invisibility, adopting many personalities as he wanders up and down the many social levels of the city. He feels deep resentment against society which fails to see him. But soon he is forced to seek real understanding, compelled by his loneliness to probe the forms of

personality and experience developed by urban Negroes and to relate them to more universal patterns. In the end he is defeated in his original purpose but has achieved some perception of the nature of his life. He hopes these, his memoirs, will, once they are read, allow him to enter into the world of things known, will serve to de ne himself. Characteristically, he doubts that they will be read.

A SPECIAL MESSAGE TO SUBSCRIBERS

Ellison wrote this account of the transition from his "prison camp novel" to the rst stirrings of Invisible Man *in 1919 for the Franklin Library edition. It was published in 1980 as the preface to this limited special edition*.

IN the winter of 1944, during the Battle of the Bulge, I served on a ship which was too busy keeping war materiel owing across the North Atlantic to take time out for the routine ushing of its water tanks. As a result, two months of drinking water so supersaturated with rust that it trickled from the taps as red as tomato soup had given me a kidney infection. This, fortunately, was a gradual development and had allowed me to continue functioning. But once we had reached the decimated harbor area of Le Havre, the condition was suddenly precipitated.

During most of that voyage I had managed to give my o -duty hours over to writing, but writers—like athletes—are more or less dependent upon their physical and mental condition. Thus it was, ailing in kidney and in art, that I had returned to New York, taken sick leave, and gone with my wife to Vermont for recuperation. The abrupt transition from war to peace, however, made for a wry sense of discontinuity. I kept grappling in the depths of my subconscious to pump the air of inspiration into the depths where it was needed, and complete the novel I had just begun prior to my entering the merchant service. It was a prison-camp novel of imagination that hinged on a combustible alignment of national and racial antagonism.

As I sat at my typewriter in the open doorway of a spacious old barn in the green Vermont shade, creatures from Afro-American fables—Jack-the-Rabbit and Jack-the-Bear—blended in my mind with gures of myth and history about whom I'd been reading: those tracings of the sinister ties which bind the generations in that basic parade of human vision whereby

the sighted are often blind and the sightless most perceptive, the son his own father-in-law, and the dedicated and self-righteous detective his own elusive criminal.

Images of incest and murder, dissolution and rebirth whirled in my head.

As though such a weird gush of otsam wasn't enough to plunge me into despair, it all became mixed with memories of such interconnected events as the Moscow Trials, the Spanish Civil War, the Russo-German Pact; agitation for equal employment in the war

industries, protests against segregation in the armed forces and for the assignment of the 99th Fighter Squadron to combat; A. Phillip Randolph's threat to lead Negroes in a march on Washington and F.D.R.'s positive response; and the struggle to prevent Harlem's absentee landlords from evicting their indigent tenants. It was as though I had entered a haunted wood wherein every detail of scene, each thought and incipient action, sprang together and became endowed with a surreal and sinister signi cance. Almost everything about me seemed bent upon contributing to my growing sense of the irrational disorder of life and the utter futility of my desperate project.

But then, one afternoon, when my mind was still bent on its nutty wanderings, my ngers took over and typed what was to become the very rst sentence of the present novel, "I am an invisible man"—an assertion so outrageous and unrelated to anything I was trying to write that I snatched it from the machine and was about to destroy it. But then, rereading it, I became intrigued. And as I sat musing, the words began to sound with a familiar timbre of voice.

Who, I asked myself, would make such a statement—and out of what kind of experience? And suddenly I could hear in my head a blackface comedian bragging on the stage of Harlem's Apollo Theatre to the e ect that each generation of his family was becoming so progressively black of complexion that no one, not even its own mother, had ever been able to see the two-year-old baby. The audience had roared with laughter, and I recognized something of the same joking, ingroup Negro American irony sounding from my rumpled page. Slowly, like an image surfacing from the

layers of an exposed Polaroid exposure, a shadow of the speaker arose in my mind and I grasped at his range of implication.

He had described himself as “invisible” which, given his Afro-American linguistic style, suggested a play on words inspired by a then popular sociological formulation which held that black Americans saw dark days because of their “high visibility.”

Translated into the ironic mode of Negro American idiom this meant that God had done it all with his creative tar brush back when He had said, “Let there be light,” and that Negroes su ered

discrimination and were penalized not because of their individual infractions of the rules which give order to American society, but because they, like ies in the milk, were just naturally more visible than white folk. In other words, this was a condition more damning than the original misconduct of Adam and Eve. And if this were true, there was no God-given or man-made ritual through which blacks could achieve social redemption. In this dark light “high visibility” and “invisibility” were, in e ect, one and the same. And, since black folk did not look at themselves out of the same eyes with which they were viewed by whites, their condition and fate rested within the eye of the beholder. If this were true, the obligation of making oneself seen and heard was an imperative of American democratic individualism. It even raised the possibility that whites didn’t always regard one another with the same focus of vision—but that was another matter.

INDIVISIBLE MAN

Crafted from observation, correspondence, and conversation, this essay is a collaboration between Ellison and James Alan McPherson, author of Hue and Cry *and* Elbow Room. *Throughout Ellison casts his “cold Oklahoma Negro eye” upon literature, race, culture, and craft, confessing that for him “craft is an aspect of morality. “It was published in* The Atlantic, *December 1970.*

The Individual stands in opposition to society, but he is nourished by it. And it is far less important to know what di erentiates him than what

nourishes him.

—*André Malraux*

July, 1969

RALPH Ellison, a pair of high-powered binoculars close to his eyes, sits by the window of his eighth-oor Riverside Drive apartment, looking down. Across the street, in the long strip of green park which parallels the Hudson River, two black boys are playing basketball. “I watch them every afternoon,” he says, and o ers the binoculars to me. I look down and recognize the hope of at least two major teams, ten years hence, developing. Perhaps future sociologists will say that they possess superior athletic abilities because of biological advantages peculiar to blacks; but perhaps by then each of these black boys will have gained enough of a sense of who he is to reply, “I’m good at what I do because I practiced it all my life.” The encouragement of this sort of self-de nition has become almost a crusade with Ellison. But I also recognize that if I ran down and waved my arms and shouted to them, “Did you know that Ralph Ellison watches you playing every afternoon?” they would continue to shoot at the basket and answer, “Who is Ralph Ellison?”

“He spoke at Tougaloo last year,” a black exchange student at Santa Cruz told me. “I can’t stand the man.”

“Why?”

“I couldn’t understand what he was saying. He wasn’t talking to *us.”* “Did you read his book?”

“No. And I don’t think I will, either. I can’t stand the man.”

If you ask him about the Tougaloo experience, Ellison will laugh and then tell an anecdote about the stuttering black student who said: “Mr. E-i-li-s-s-s- *on*, I r-r- *ead* your b-b- *ook The Inv-v-v-si-b-b-ble M*-m- *man*. B-b-but after he-e-e-armg you tonight I f-f- *feel* like I j-j-ju-

ust hear-r-ri J-j-je-sus C-c-ch-r-r-rist d-d-d-runk on *Thunderbird Wine!”*

And if you laugh along with him, and if you watch Ellison's eyes as you laugh, you will realize that he is only testing a deep scar to see if it has healed.

Ellison's di culty, one cause of all the cuts, is that matter of self-de nition. At a time when many blacks, especially the young, are denying all in uences of American culture, Ellison, as always, doggedly a rms his identity as a Negro-American, a product of the blending of both cultures. But more than this, he attempts to explore most of the complex implications of this burden in his ction, his essays, his speeches, and his private life. He is nothing as simple as a "brown-skinned aristocrat" (as Richard Kostelanetz characterized him in a *Shenandoah* essay-portrait last summer); rather, he is a thinking black man who has integrated his homework into the fabric of his private life. "I don't recognize any white culture," he says. "I recognize no American culture which is not the partial creation of black people. I recognize no American style in literature, in dance, in music, even in assembly-line processes, which does not bear the mark of the American Negro." And he means it. For this reason he has di culty reconciling some of the ideas of black nationalists, who would view black culture as separate from the broader American culture. To these people he says, "I don't recognize any black culture the way many people use the expression." And Ellison is one of the few black intellectuals who have struggled to assess the in uence of the black on American culture and the relationships between the two. But, until fairly recently, not many blacks—

perhaps even college-educated blacks—knew that he existed.

In 1952 Ellison published his rst novel, *Invisible Man*, which won a National Book Award; and this at a time when the white critical Establishment was less eager to recognize literary achievement by black Americans. Now, almost nineteen years later, he is still the only black American who has received this honor. The novel has gone through twenty paperback printings and was judged, in a 1965

Book Week poll of two hundred authors, critics, and editors, "the most distinguished single work published in the last twenty years."

A second book, a collection of essays and interviews called *Shadow*

and Act, was published in 1964, and is essential reading for any attempt at understanding Ellison, the man or the artist. While *Invisible Man* is a story of one man's attempt to understand his society and himself, the essays outline Ellison's own successful struggle to master the craft of the writer and to understand, and then a rm, the complexities of his own rich cultural experience.

Ellison likes to call himself a college dropout because he completed only three years of a music major at Tuskegee Institute before coming to New York in 1936. Before that he was a shoeshine boy, a jazz musician, a janitor, a freelance photographer, and a man who hunted game during the Depression to keep himself alive.

Today he is a member, and a former vice president, of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, a member of New York's Century club and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a trustee of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. He is a former teacher at Bard, Rutgers, and Chicago, and presently is Albert Schweitzer Professor in the Humanities at New York University. He has an interest in noncommercial television which began with his work on the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television, and continues with his trusteeships in the Educational Broadcasting Corporation, and the National Citizens' Committee for Broadcasting. Among his awards are listed the Russwurm Award, the Medal of Freedom (awarded by President Johnson), ve honorary Ph.D.'s, and one of the highest honors which France can bestow on a foreign writer: Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres, awarded to him in 1970 by the French Minister of Cultural A airs, André Malraux. But all these experiences seem to have equal weight in his mind; all seem to have given equal access to information, equal opportunity for observation of the culture. And he is as likely to begin a discussion with some observation made when he was a shoeshine boy as he is to mention the rst names of some of America's most respected writers and critics.

Ellison's success does not prove, as one writer says, that "a fatherless American Negro really does have the opportunity to become the author of one of America's greatest novels, as well as an aristocratic presence and an all but universally respected literary

gure.” His achievements are too enormous to be reduced to a sociological cliché, a rhetorical formulation. If anything, his success proves that intelligence, perseverance, discipline, and love for one’s work are together too great a combination to be contained, or even de ned, in terms of race.

Although he lives in New York and has access to literary and intellectual areas, Ellison seems to have very limited contact with the black writers who also live there. Yet his shadow lies over all their writers’ conferences, and his name is likely to be invoked, and defamed, by any number of the participants at any conference. One man has said that he would like to shoot Ellison. Another, whom Ellison has never met, has for almost ten years blamed Ellison for his not receiving the last Prix de Rome Award, given by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. On the other hand, a growing number of young black writers, among them Ernest J.

Gaines, Cecil Brown, Michael Harper, Ishmael Reed, and Al Young, are quick to admit their respect for him.

He reads the work of black writers, dismisses some of it, and is always willing to give an endorsement. And although he is very protective of his time, his telephone number is listed in the Manhattan directory, and he will usually grant an interview or a few hours of conversation in the afternoon (his working day usually ends at 4:00 P.M.) to anyone who is insistent.

“A fellow called me one morning,” Ellison chuckles, lighting up a cigar, “said he just had to see me. So I consented. I went to the door, and there was a brown-skinned fellow from the Village. He brought a bottle of wine, several records, and four attempts at short stories. I looked at these things, and they weren’t really stories, so I asked,

‘What do you want me to tell you?’ He said, ‘Well, what I want you to do is to tell me, should I just write, or should I tell the truth?’

“Ellison pauses to laugh deep in his chest. “I said, ‘Tell the truth.’ “

“He came to Oberlin in April of 1969,” a black girl in Seattle recalled. “His speech was about how American black culture had blended into American white culture. But at the meeting with the

black caucus after the speech, the black students said, ‘You don’t have anything to tell us.’ “

“What did he say?”

“He just accepted it very calmly. One girl said to him, ‘Your book doesn’t mean anything because in it you’re shooting down Ras the Destroyer, a rebel leader of black people.’ “

“What was his answer?”

“He said, ‘Remember now, this book was written a long time ago.

This is just one man’s view of what he saw, how he interpreted what he saw. I don’t make any apologies for it.’ Well, she went on to tell him, ‘That just proves that you’re an Uncle Tom.’ “

Another of Ellison’s problems, one peculiar to any black who attempts to assert his own individuality in his own terms, is that he challenges the defense mechanisms of the black community.

Because of a history of enforced cohesiveness, some blacks have come to believe in a common denominator of understanding, even a set number of roles and ideas which are assumed to be useful to the community. Doctors, lawyers, teachers, social workers, some orthodox thinkers, some orthodox writers are accepted—as long as they do not insist on ideas which are foreign to the community’s own sense of itself. But when a black man attempts to think beyond what has been thought before, or when he asserts a vision of reality which con icts with or challenges the community’s conception, there is a movement, sometimes unconscious, to bring him back into line or, failing that, to ostracize him. The “mass man” of sociological terminology is the “right-on man” of black slang, gliding smoothly and simplistically, and perhaps more comfortably, over questionable assumptions, and reducing himself to a cliché in the process. For a black thinker such as Ellison, this assertion of individual vision is especially painful because the resultant ostracism carries with it the charge of “selling out” or “trying to be white.” Yet a white thinker who challenges assumptions held by whites about themselves is not charged with “trying to

be black.” The underlying assumption is that whites have a monopoly on individuality and intelligence, and

in order for a black man to lay claim to his own, he must necessarily change color.

In response to charges by attackers that he is a “token Negro”

because he is very often the only black serving on cultural commissions, Ellison says, “All right, if you don’t want me on, I’ll resign. But you had better put a *cardboard Negro* in my place because when decisions are made which will a ect black people you had better make sure that those people who make the decisions remember that you exist and are forced to make sure that some of your interests are being met.”

This impulse toward leveling, however, is not con ned to the black community. It is a minority-group reaction. And while Ellison remembers a black professor at Tuskegee who tore up a leather-bound volume of Shakespeare’s plays to discourage his interest in literature, he also remembers a white professor friend who said,

“Ah, here’s Ralph again, talking about America. There’s no goddamn America out there.”

“At Oberlin,” the Seattle girl said, “one of the ideas they couldn’t accept was Ellison’s statement that black styles had historically been incorporated into American life. He went on to say that in the future, don’t be surprised if white people begin to wear Afros because that’s now a part of American popular culture. Well, the kids went out screaming, ‘Who is he to insult what we wear? No honky could wear an Afro. They’re stealing what is ours.’ “

One year later, disenchanted white youth, on both coasts and in between, are sporting their versions of the Afro.

Iowa City, Iowa

June, 1969

Dear Mr. Ellison:

I would like to come and talk with you.…

New York, New York

June, 1969

Dear Mr. McPherson:

Will you be in the East on July 7? I can see you at 3:00 P.M.

Ellison is as practiced a listener as he is a speaker, and gives even the most naively put question thorough consideration before responding. He is a bit guarded at rst, perhaps unwinding from a day at his desk, perhaps adjusting to the intellectual level of his guest. Then he begins talking, occasionally pausing to light a cigar, occasionally glancing out the window at the street, the park, the river beyond. After a while you both are trading stories and laughing while Mrs. Ellison makes noises in the kitchen, just o the living room. A parakeet utters into the room. Ellison calls it, imitating its chirps, and the bird comes and hovers near his hand.

“Have you ever heard a dog talk?” he asks.

“No.”

We go into his study, and he plays a tape of a dog clearly imitating the rhythm and pitch of a human voice saying “hello.” We listen again, and laugh again. Mrs. Ellison calls us to dinner. It is di cult to enjoy the food and digest his conversation at the same time.

“Ralph, stop talking and let him eat,” Mrs. Ellison says.

After dinner we move back into the living room and continue the conversation. Finally Ellison’s dog, Tucka Tarby, comes into the room and walks back and forth between us. Then you realize that it is well after midnight and that you have put a serious dent in the essential personal rhythm of a writer’s day. Tucka has been patient, waiting for his evening walk. Ellison puts on an army jacket and we go down in the elevator. This is

an old building, just on the edge of Harlem, and most of the tenants are black. The lobby has colored tiles, a high ceiling, and live owers protected by glass. “I’ve lived here for eighteen years,” he says. “But it wasn’t until 1964 that some of the people found out I was a writer.” Tucka pulls us up 150th Street toward Broadway. We shake hands, and he and the dog walk o into the Harlem night.

“I think that what made it hard for him,” the Seattle girl said, “was that LeRoi Jones was coming to Oberlin that next day. The kids gured that Jones the Master is coming, so let’s get rid of this cat.

But I think he’s very gutsy, in a day like today with all these so-called militants trying to run him into the ground, coming to Oberlin saying to the kids, ‘You are American, not African.’ “

“Did anyone come to his defense?”

“One of the teachers stopped the meeting at one point and said,

‘Would you please listen to what the man has to say? You’re sitting here criticizing, and some of you haven’t even read the damn book.’

“

Among his peers Ellison’s presence or even the mention of his name causes the immediate arming of intellectual equipment. There can be no soft-pedaling, no relaxation of intellect where he is involved.

At Brown University in November of 1969, novelists and critics gathered at the annual Wetmore Lecture to discuss form, the future of the novel, and each other. Critic Robert Scholes opened one discussion on form by reading from Ellison’s acceptance speech before the National Book Award Committee. “Ah, Ellison,” Leslie Fiedler said, throwing his arm out in a gesture of dismissal. “He’s a black Jew.”

Ellison chuckles. “Leslie’s been trying to make me a Jew for years,” he says. “I have to look at these things with a Cold Oklahoma Negro Eye. But someone should have said that *all* us old-fashioned Negroes are Jews.”

Iowa City, Iowa

August, 1969

Dear Mr. Ellison:

From what I have read of recent American ction, I sense a shift in interest on the part of the reading public, and consequently in the focus of those who write the books which become popular. The trend seems to be a movement away from traditional forms (the naturalism, for example, which has always been so convenient for black writers), and a change in content as well. Science

ction, mythological experiences, journalistic accounts and pornography, for example, are very popular now. Do you see this as a passing trend, or is something more revolutionary at work? And if these present interests are only temporary, do you think that the more serious areas of the black cultural experience will still be of su cient interest to sustain an audience for serious black writers?

ELLISON: “I think that we are always going to have periods in which we will shift toward an interest in the pornographic. But this country has a tendency to get fed up with any novelty very quickly, and then we tend to put things back into perspective. We like novelty. It’s pretty shocking to have a book which has a theme about masturbation. That’s interesting, but not unexpected; we are always interested in revealing that which is supposed to be unrevealable. That’s part of the American thing. But I don’t think that this indicates that our interest in form has changed.

“I think that our sense of formal completeness is a psychological thing that is rooted in our sense of the seasons, in our sense of lightness and darkness. I think the tendency now is to feel that an interest in form is beside the point. But I also note that those people who tell you this and who write in a supposed disregard of form are always trying to get a group of people who will accept their form.

There is no art without form. The form becomes a convention. And once you get enough people to accept that as a proper way of doing a novel or of

writing a play, then you have imposed a new convention of form. So you can say that form is conventional on the one hand, but at the same time our sense of a beginning, middle, and end is built into human biology. And that isn't going to go away.

"One plays around with form, extends form, contracts form—

depending on the convention popular at the time, but I don't think you ever get completely away from it. And I think that writers who tell themselves that they don't *have* to learn form are deluding themselves, because it is in form itself that a great part of the psychology of the character, the reader, and the writer, is involved.…

"I just don't think that we can escape from form, because when you write a piece of ction, you write it to be read. I'm reminded that when Joyce was writing *Finnegans Wake* he was spending as much time writing to critics and friends as to how those sections which were being published over a period of years were supposed to be read. He was setting them up for a formal reception of a new form.

"As for the future popularity of black writers, I'm hesitant to make a prediction because so many of them seem to be still caught up at the point of emphasizing *inwardness* without emphasizing the inward-outwardness. There is a rhetoric of ction, and in order to master the rhetoric of the form, you have to be aware of the people who are outside your immediate community. And the rhetoric depends upon not only a knowledge of human passion, but the speci c situations in which that passion is expressed: the manners, the formal patterns, and so on, as well as the political issues around which they are clustered. So that if our black writers are going to become more in uential in the broader community, they will do it in terms of style: by imposing a style upon a su cient area of American life to give other readers a sense that this is true, that here is a revelation of reality. I think that this is the way it works. And this is going to depend upon writers who get a clear sense of what they're doing.

"Black writers could sustain a place for themselves in American literature. It's possible, but I couldn't predict it because I don't know what's going on. It's just hard for me to tell. There is a lot of activity, and very often the

people who make the breakthroughs are not the people who are doing a lot of talking and getting the attention. They are quietly trying to make something new out of their experience and out of their experience of literature. I can just say that I hope that as we learn to translate and to interpret the intricacies of our experience as a group of people, we can do it with enough art and with an impact which will raise it from the speci c to the universal."

Ellison is not only interested in the ction written by young black writers; he is concerned about young black people in general: what they are thinking, what they are doing, what their ambitions are.

But his knowledge of them is limited to sessions during speaking engagements, letters, and what he hears from the media. "A hell of a lot of them are reading my book," he observes with obvious pleasure. "I have a way of checking this. And for a long time they didn't read much of anything."

Yet Ellison worries that despite the increased educational opportunities available to them, young black people are becoming too involved in, and almost symbolic of, the campus reactions against intellectual discipline, the life of the mind. "It's too damn bad," he says. "You see that men are now analyzing the song of the whales, the talk of dolphins, planning to go to the moon; computer technology is becoming more and more humanized and miniaturized; great e orts are being made to predetermine sex, to analyze cells, to control the life process in the human animal. And all of this is done with the *mind*. Indeed," he goes on, "the irony is that we've never really gotten away from that old *body* business, the Negro as symbolic of *instinctual* man. Part of my pride in being what I am is that as a dancer, as a physical man …" and again that distant chuckle comes from deep within his chest, "I bet you I can outdance, outri most of these intellectuals who're supposed to have come back." Now he is serious again. *"But that isn't the problem, damnit!* I was *born* doing *this!* It's a glorious thing to know the uses of the body and not to be afraid of it, but *that has to be linked to the mind*. I don't see any solution for literary art. If you're a dancer, ne.

If you're a musician, ne. But what are you going to do as a writer, or what are you going to do as a critic?" He sighs as if he were weighed down by

these considerations.

“I nd this very interesting,” he continues, “but not new. When I think about Tuskegee and people with whom I went to school, I know that over and over again they really did not extend themselves because they didn’t have the imagination to look thirty years ahead

to a point where there would be a place for them in the broader American society if they had been prepared.”

He says: “I understand ambition; I understand the rejection of goals because they’re not self-ful lling. I’ve turned down too many things, starting as a youngster.”

Ellison looks out the window toward the Hudson, then continues in a lower tone. “I was married once before, and one reason that marriage came to an end was that my in-laws were disgusted with me, thought I had no ambition, because I didn’t want a job in the Post O ce. And here I was with a dream of myself writing the symphony at twenty-six which would equal anything Wagner had done at twenty-six. This is where my ambitions were. So I can understand people getting turned o on that level. But what I can’t understand is people who do not master a technique or discipline which will get them to a point where they can actually see that it’s not what they want or that something else is demanded. But over and over again I see black kids who are dropping out or rejecting intellectual discipline as though what exists now will always exist, and as though they don’t have the possibility of changing it by using these disciplines as techniques to a rm *their* sense of what a human life should be. It’s there where I get upset.”

Ellison has a habit of pausing whenever the discussion begins to touch areas pregnant with emotion, as if careful of remaining within a certain context. But on some subjects he is likely to continue. “I also get upset when I see announcements of prizes and medical discoveries, and scienti c advances, and I don’t see any black names or black faces. I believe that we are *capable,”* he says. “I believe that there are enough unique features in our background to suggest solutions to problems which seem very far removed from our social situation.”

The duality of cultural experience which Ellison insists on in his writing is acted out in his professional and personal life. He is just as much at home, just as comfortable, in a Harlem barbershop as he is as a panelist before the Southern Historical Association exchanging arguments with C. Vann Woodward, Robert Penn Warren, and William Styron. He is a novelist well respected by his

peers (when his name is mentioned in almost any literary circle, there will invariably be an inquiry about his current project), and he brings to bear the same respect for craft in an introduction to the stories of Stephen Crane as he uses to evaluate the work of the black artist Romare Bearden. Yet precisely because of his racial identity, he is also the leading black writer in American letters. And while he disclaims this position as "an accident, part luck and part a product of the confusion over what a black writer is and what an American writer is," the reality is there, nevertheless, and has to be coped with.

MCPHERSON: "It seems to me that much of our writing has been, and continues to be, sociological because black writers have been concerned with protesting black humanity and racial injustice to the larger society in those terms most easily understood by nonblack people. It also seems to me that we can correct this limitation either by de ning and a rming the values and cultural institutions of our people for their education, or by employing our own sense of reality and our own conception of what human life should be to explore, and perhaps help de ne, the cultural realities of contemporary American life. In either case, do you think that naturalism is su cient to deal adequately with the subtle complexities of contemporary black cultural experience?"

ELLISON: "I don't think that naturalism is enough for us because so much that is negative has been made of our naturalistic or our physical variations from other Americans. Besides, the implicit mode of Negro-American culture is abstract, and this comes from the very nature of our relationship to this country.

"First, we came from Africa. We had to learn English. We had, in other words, to create ourselves as a people—and this I take right down to the racial, the bloodlines, the mingling of African blood with bloodlines

indigenous to the New World. A few people can trace their connections back to a given African tribe, but most of us

can't. We can't even trace our blood back only to Africa because most of us are part Indian, Spanish, Irish, part any and every damn thing. But *culturally* we represent a synthesis of any number of these elements, and that's a problem of abstraction in itself; it's abstraction and recombining.

"When we began to build up a sense of ourselves, we did it by abstracting from the Bible, abstracting the myths of the ancient Jews, the early Christians, modifying them as we identi ed with these people and projecting ourselves. This was an abstract process.

We knew that we were not white; we knew that we were not Hebrews; but we also knew something else: we knew that we didn't *have* to be in order to make these abstractions and recombinations.

This was a creative process, one of the most wonderful things which ever happened on the face of the earth. This is one of the great strengths which now people seem to want to deny. But this was the *reuni cation* of a shattered group of people.

"Now, American Negro music was not simply the product of remembered African rhythms. It took Western melodic forms and modi ed them, took Western rhythmical forms and combined them, and produced a music. American Negro dance is a result of abstracting the courtly dances which were danced in the manor houses. The jigs and ings which the Irish and Scotch had brought over from the British Isles were appropriated by the slaves and combined with African dance patterns. And out of this abstraction and recombination you got the basis of the American choreography.

"Our experience in the acculturative process di ered from the European's because he didn't have the necessity. This can be said about American culture in general: it *was* an extension of European culture. What is new about it is the presence of the African in uence as projected by black Americans. Irish folklore, English folklore, Scottish folklore, the music and so on all found a place in colonial America. Not only was there a conscious

e ort to preserve the forms of high European culture, but at the same time there was a vernacular style—the speech which people spoke on the streets as they came to grips with the nature of the New World—the plants, the rivers, the climate, and so on. There was a modi cation of

language necessary to communicate with the slaves and with people who came from other parts of Europe. All of these created a tension which in turn created what we call the vernacular style. Our technology was vernacular. And it grew so fast precisely because they had to throw o the assumptions of European technology and create one which was in keeping with conditions in the New World: the availability of materials, the wide distances, the need to build things which could be quickly assembled and abandoned without much waste. Nevertheless, on the level of the educated classes, there was an e ort to preserve the European heritage which did not stop when we made a revolutionary break with England.

“But *we* didn’t have that. We had some of the same pressures to assert identity in another place at another time—which the Irish and the Germans had. But *they* could do it. And you had this fact too: these people came in waves, but many of them still spoke the brogue. Other people from other European countries, the rst generation at least, didn’t speak English. But we happen to be a people who can’t remember when we didn’t speak English. So we had that to help us, and the Bible, the language of the King James version, to shape whatever literary or religious e orts we made.

And nothing else. We couldn’t fall back on African language. Thus we see immediately that there was a vast di erence between our options and the options of Americans of European background.”

Before he accepted the professorship at New York University, Ellison earned a good part of his income from college speaking engagements. He accepted around twenty each year. He tends to favor the East Coast or Midwest and avoids the West Coast, partially because of the great distance and partially because of the political nature of the West. He is much in demand, although his fee is usually $1500 to $2000. In the past year he has spoken at such colleges as Millsaps, East Texas State, Rockland, Illinois, West Point, and Iowa State University at Ames.

Ellison takes pride in being able to deliver a ninety-minute speech without the aid of notes. He will make some few digressions to

illuminate his points, but will always pick up the major thread and carry it through to its preconceived end.

March, 1970

Ralph Ellison stands on a stage broad enough to seat a full symphony orchestra. Before him, packed into a massive new auditorium of gray concrete and glass and deep red carpets, 2700

Ames students strain to hear the words of the man billed as “Ralph Ellison: Writer.” Ames is almost an agricultural school, and its students still have fraternity rows, beer parties, frat pins and ties, white shirts and jackets. Most of them are the beardless sons of farmers and girls whose ambitions extend only as far as engagement by the senior year. The American Dream still lingers here, the simple living, the snow, the hamburgers and milk shakes, the country music and crickets and corn. This is the breadbasket of the country, the middle of Middle America. And yet, ninety miles away in Iowa City, students torn from these same roots are about to burn buildings. “When the pioneers got to your part of the country,”

Ellison tells them, speaking again of the vernacular, the functional level of the American language, “there was no word for ‘prairie’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary”* His speech is on “The Concept of Race in American Literature.” And he delivers just that. But it is abstract, perhaps over the heads of many of the students there (even though parts of it later appeared as a *Time* essay in the issue on “Black America”). Still, the students are quiet, respectful, attempting to digest. Speaking of the ethnic blending which began with the formation of the country, he says, “And, to make it brief, there was a whole bunch of people from Africa who were not introduced by the British, but quite some time before were introduced into what later became South Carolina by the Spanish. Whereupon they immediately began to revolt—” Here loud applause oats down to the lower audience from black students in the second balcony.

Ellison pauses, then continues: “—and went wild, and started passing for Indians. I hear a lot about black people passing for white, but remember, they rst started passing for Indians.” There is

some giggling and laughter at this, but behind me I notice a black student cringing.

During the question-and-answer session afterwards, the students ask the usual things: the con ict between Richard Wright and James Baldwin, the order of symbols in *Invisible Man*. One girl wants to know if racial miscegenation is a necessary ingredient of racial integration. He laughs, “Where’d you get that word?” he says, and answers, “I don’t think that any of us Americans wants to lose his ethnic identity. This is another thing which has been used to manipulate the society in terms of race. Some few people might want to lose their identities; this has happened. But I would think that the very existence of such strong Negro-American in uences in the society, the style, the way things are done, would indicate that there’s never been the desire to lose that. There’s just too much self-congratulation in so much of Negro-American expression. They wouldn’t want to give that up.” He says, “The thing that black people have been ghting for for so long was the opportunity to decide whether they *wanted* to give it up or not. And the proof is that in this period when there is absolutely more racial freedom than has ever existed before, you have the most militant rejection of integration. These are individual decisions which will be made by a few people. But if I know anything about the human being, what *attracts* a man to a woman has usually been picked up very early from the rst woman he’s had contact with. There is enough of a hold of tradition, of ways of cooking, of ways of just relaxing, which comes right out of the family circle, to keep us in certain groups.”

At the reception after the speech, the whites dominate all three rooms; the few black students cluster together in one. Ellison moves between the two, sometimes almost tearing himself away from the whites. He talks to the black students about books, LeRoi Jones, Malcolm X, color, their personal interests. They do not say much. A white woman brings a book for his autograph; a professor gives a nervous explanation of the source of the miscegenation question: the girl has been reading Norman Podhoretz’s

essay, “My Negro Problem and Ours” in his course. Ellison smiles and shifts back and forth on his feet like a boxer. Everyone is pleasantly high. The black

students, still in a corner, are drinking Coke. I am leaving, eager to be out in the Iowa snow. We shake hands. “This is awkward,” he says. “Call me Ralph and I’ll call you Jim.”

Santa Cruz, California

April, 1970

Dear Ralph:

In 1961 you predicted that a period would come “when Negroes are going to be wandering around because we’ve had this thing (assumed restrictions imposed by sociological conditions) thrown at us so long that we haven’t had a chance to discover what in our own background is really worth preserving.”

Despite the present movement toward “black awareness,” and despite the attempts of blacks to assert their own values and attitudes over those of the white group, do you think that we are any further along in discovering or de ning whatever there is in our cultural traditions, beyond reactions to externally imposed restrictions, which has contributed to our strength as a people?

ELLISON: “I think that too many of our assertions continue to be in response to whites. I think that we’re polarized by the very fact that we keep talking about ‘black awareness’ when we really should be talking about black American awareness, an awareness of where we t into the total American scheme, where our in uence is. I tell white kids that instead of talking about black men in a white world or black men in white society, they should ask themselves how black *they* are because black men have been in uencing the values of the society and the art forms of the society. How many of their parents fell in love listening to Nat King Cole?

“We did not develop as a people in isolation. We developed within a context of white people. Yes, we have a special awareness because our experience has, in certain ways, been uniquely di erent from that of white people, but it was not absolutely di erent. A poor man is a poor man whether he’s black or white. A white man might rationalize and get a sense of satisfaction out of his whiteness, but as far as meat on the table and clothes on the back are concerned,

he’s still a poor man. And if he isn’t in the position to *get* more clothes, then he’s in no better position than the black person. And that’s one of the things that various groups are now beginning to emphasize: the unity between black and white on an economic level, a unity of interest between poor people, black, white, Indians, Mexican-Americans. To move into some sort of black awareness which is narcissistic is a mistake because it’s false. For me to try to look at American literature written by whites—say Melville, for example—and not know that I’m there, my people are there, not just in terms of character but in terms of symbols, in terms of vision, in terms of speech, in terms of mythology … The stu is there. If you go back and look at photographs or paintings, Early American or nineteenth-century, you’ll always see *us*. We’re there. We are part of the scene. Constance Rourke [American cultural historian (1885-1941), author of *The Roots of American Culture*] is right when she points out the role we have played as archetypal gures. So the movement backwards to get a fuller sense of ourselves, to get a sense of the community and its needs, of the traditions and so on, is good. There’s an assumption that every black person knows the traditions. Many don’t, but many do. And those who don’t should talk to those who do.

“That’s one of the advantages of a Southern upbringing: a lot of things which got lost up here were not lost back there. I mean just things you took for granted, things I assumed everybody knew. I had friends who grew up in New Jersey telling me that Southern Negroes didn’t know how to box. I said, ‘Where the hell do you think Jack Johnson came from?’ But they had built up that notion of Northern Black Superiority. I remember serving on a ship during the war where one of the messmen referred to Southern Negroes as

‘boogies.’ I said, ‘Well, *I’m* from the South.’ And he said, ‘But you’re not one of *them*.’ He was just as prejudiced against Southern blacks as whites were. But you got that sense of a loss of continuity which has to be regained. Part of the tragedy—one of the pathetic and ironic things—about Stokely Carmichael’s activities is that he went down South and condescended. No one has pointed this out, but

there was a hell of a lot of condenscension from this West Indian boy toward blacks. And he did a lot of damage.

“You can look at Booker T. Washington, for example—and I’m very critical of the man, but any objective view which isn’t hung up on the black-white issue as such, and which tries to look at the man in terms of the distribution of power, would make you realize that Washington was one of the most powerful politicians the South had ever known. That was reality. You don’t have to like the circumstances which *allowed* him to assume that kind of power—

and I’m talking about his relationship with government and great economic powers. We have to come to grips with this. It has to be a part of our awareness of who we are. And simply by moving back and saying, ‘Well, this was slavery, and this man said that we should get education and not worry about political rights’ is not enough.

We have to learn *why* DuBois never became the same kind of power gure, no matter what we think of DuBois. We have to know what happened to those linkages with power after Washington left. We’ve got to quit imposing second-class standards on ourselves. When you tell me that a man is a great sociologist, and you tell me he was a student for a while of Max Weber’s, then I am compelled, out of my own sense of Negro humanity, to compare his achievements with those of Weber. My wish, my hope, my dream is that he achieve more than Weber, but if he didn’t, damn it, he just didn’t. And the next man who comes along will have to go beyond not only him but beyond Max Weber. And our relationship to reality is such that, given the mind and the energy and industry, our social thinkers *will* go beyond. But they won’t go beyond by simply receiving the ideas handed down to them and just making it by simply repeating these ideas. They have to be more creative.

“We need to get a human perspective, and if we could get this we could put things into a more fruitful, creative perspective. So many of our kids who are most militant really believe that whites are superior to them. That’s why they keep asserting ‘Blackness!

Blackness! Blackness!’ The thing to do, I would think, would be to recognize that there have been certain advantages. There’s no doubt that many of these whites have had better educational

opportunities, and it’s going to be di cult competing with them *for a while*. But it seems to me that if you recognize that they’ve had the advantage and that you are going to have to work harder, once your brain is programmed with the proper amount of information you’re going to catch up. I’ve seen this happen. But I see some of these kids at universities all clustered together, and they look a little bit pathetic. I want to say to them, ‘Look, it just isn’t so. It just isn’t so!

Just drop this and take some chances. You’re as good as anybody here.’

“As for those charges of white paternalism, part of this business is a way of relating, which becomes o ensive because it’s presumptuous. My experience with that kind of conversation came from the left, from the Communist Party. They had their theories straight from wherever they came from, and they interpreted everything. That was one of the problems with Wright; they were always trying to tell Wright that he wasn’t following the line. This was so because they thought they had the complexity of his experience down on paper. I guess that’s inevitable in this country, and our kids are going to have to learn what their forefathers learned; that there is a certain forbearance, and a certain acceptance of our own maturity, our own human maturity. And in some ways Negroes are much more mature; we damn well should be because we’ve had a harder time. But we keep getting this mixed up with obsequiousness or with fear, which is the way the *white* man interprets it. When blacks come right along they say, ‘You’ve been brainwashed.’ Well, they don’t realize that *they* are the ones who have been programmed.

“I remember my mother talking to me about a friend of my family’s who kind of went o her rocker. Her father was very, very fond of me, and she

began to say that she thought maybe he *was* my father, which just upset me because I was an adolescent. I went to my mother telling her how o ended I was, and my mother didn't get angry. She simply said, 'Now, look. You're old enough to know that this woman is kind of crazy. You keep that in your mind.' And that was that.

"Some years ago when I was making certain statements, there were critics who in conversation would say, 'Ah, you don't know what you're talking about.' But what I couldn't get across a few years ago has become more and more clear to people who are really thinking about it. You see, the one thing that happened in this country after the Hayes-Tilden Compromise was that the whole focus upon the relationship of black people and their culture to the broader culture was sort of shut down. Not much light could come through. Historians wrote histories of the Civil War, and social critics wrote interpretations of American culture and society which did not give us very much of a role. We were pushed to the back of the head, to the underside of the mind, so to speak. And it wasn't until the agitations started in the South and began to spread that they began to look back. Now I don't mean to imply that we were the sole force which made for the reevaluation of the culture, because there has been revisionism going on across the board. But the agitations made it a little bit more impossible to ignore our presence. They made it a little bit more impossible not to ask the questions: who are they? what are they doing? what have they done? what is their in uence? After all, there are millions of them and they're always present. How have they been a ecting us other than in terms of music and dance?

"In 1942 when I was on the *Negro Quarterly* I sent around a lot of letters to critics asking, What is it you would like to see discussed as to the relationship between the Negro cultural background and the larger American culture? Only a few responded. They had never thought about it. But I knew that the relationship was there because if I, in order to make something out of the folklore which I knew, had to go often to white writers because we didn't write about it much, I knew that there had to be some reciprocal action on *their* part because they could live with the assumption that we were not important, while *I* never could. And I think that political developments and the sheer pressure of time—the role in the world which the nation achieved after the Second World War—made all these questions

come to the fore. So that now when I make a statement which previously would have sounded wild, it isn’t wild

anymore. We’ve had enough people studying the music, collecting the folklore; just a simple thing like traveling in the South and seeing black people in our natural habitat—seeing some of the contrasts—has done a lot. There are questions about American society which need to be answered, and if a black critic can answer them, these answers will be accepted. If an American sociologist can take the theories of E. Franklin Frazier and use them partially against us in all good faith, and these theories can nd their way into legislative programs, there’s no reason why literary interpretations —interpretations of the culture coming from us—

can’t be just as e ective. Because the kids want to know.”

There are thousands and thousands of books in the rooms of Ellison’s apartment, and besides the pieces of sculpture, paintings, African violets, self-designed furniture, and other symbols of a highly cultivated sensibility, are deep drawers and le cabinets which, if opened, reveal thick sheaves of notes and manuscripts.

Ellison’s huge desk, which sits in a study just o the living room, is covered with books, a red electric typewriter, well-thumbed manuscripts, and tape equipment. In conversation he always sits away from it, in the leather-strap chair by the window, looking out on the Hudson and the street below.

He is a very direct and open man, even though there are silent levels of intimidating intelligence and unexpressed feeling beneath much of what he says. And he tends to approach even the most abstract idea from a personal point of view, usually including in any observation some supportive incident drawn from his own experience.

He talks freely of his mother, who died when he was in his early twenties, his relatives in Oklahoma, his professional relationships with other writers and critics, conversations with people on the subway or in the streets of Harlem, a recent chance meeting with Kurt Vonnegut in the streets of Manhattan, his respect for Saul Bellow as an extremely well read novelist.

There is not an unkind, unprofessional, or imperceptive word for anyone, not even his most

rabid critics. But he does become irritated if you question too closely his sense of identity as an American writer as opposed to a black writer, and is likely to react when he senses a too containing category being projected onto him. “Let’s put it this way, Jim,” he says, irritation in his voice. “You see, I *work* out of American literature. In order to write the kind of ction that I write I would *have* to be in touch with a broader literary culture than our own particular culture.” He pauses, and then says, “This is not to denigrate what we have done, but in all *candor* we haven’t begun to do what we can do or what we should have done. I think one reason why we haven’t is that we’ve looked at our relationship to American literature in a rather negative way. That is, we’ve looked at it in terms of our trying to break into it. Well, damn it”—and his voice rises, and his hand hits the arm of the chair— *“that literature is built o our folklore, to a large extent!”* Then he laughs that deep honest chuckle, and says, “I ain’t conceding that to *nobody I.”*

Santa Cruz, California

April, 1970

Dear Amelia:

I was very pleased to have met you during my stay in Ames. Now, before the spring holidays begin, I wish you would tell me your impressions of Ellison as an artist, as a black man in touch with young black people as a man of ideas.…

Ames, Iowa April, 1970

Dear James:

As an artist the man is beautiful. I think that is what was so captivating about his book. The symbolism that he uses and the combination of literary mechanics that he employs will probably make his work much more lasting

than that of his black contemporaries. *Invisible Man* is a classic, and to say any more or less about it would be an understatement.

As for being in touch with the ideas of young people today, I think that he is quite aware, but he doesn't have the charisma that one would expect after hearing his reputation as a speaker and taking into account the acclaim his book has received. Part of my feeling is due to the disappointment of hearing him explain the gure in *Invisible Man*. So many concerned blacks had read the

plight of the Afro-American into this gure with no face and no name. So many people saw the author riding to champion the cause of the black man. Those same people heard him say that the symbol was representative of a universal man. I found that most disheartening.

We are unfortunate at Ames, as well as at many other places across this nation, to have a group of young people who have been introduced to new ideologies and a new rhetoric, and are attempting to adopt both when they do not understand either. Therefore when they see or hear anyone who does not speak in their rhetoric they cannot, do not, and will not try to communicate with him. This was very true of Ellison.

He has a lot to say to a people who will listen to him. Today's youth are angry, and many times this anger closes their ears to a di erent rationale.

Ellison's language and approach, I fear, attach to him the stigma of black bourgeois and conservatism. This gure does not communicate well with the vocal black youth.…

Santa Cruz, California

April, 1970

Dear Ralph:

There is a popular phrase, widely circulated now by militants, to the e ect that the present "movement" cannot a ord any individuals, that if you "are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem."

For the black writer, I assume this means that he cannot deal analytically with the complexities of black experience in ction unless he asserts the current ideological thoughts of the group as construed by its “spokesmen.” This, of course, is an ancient argument (food, usually, for those abortive black writers’

conferences), and I know that your position has always been that the writer, whether or not he is black, must assert his special vision above all other considerations, go it alone, even at the risk of eliciting criticisms from the community and from “friends of the Negro.” But do you nd that maintaining this position has alienated you and your work from the masses of the black community and has made you a symbol, a point of convenient attack for certain members of the white critical Establishment whose simplistic conceptions of black people and black life are threatened by your constant assertions of the complexities? Have you altered in any way the views you expressed in the essay

“The World and the Jug”?*

ELLISON: “I’m a little tougher than that. In the rst place, I suppose I was disciplined for the predicament which I nd myself in now—if it is a predicament—by all of my life. I’ve always had the strange role of being before the public and yet not quite part of the crowd.

As a kid, I was always in the plays and programs; as a trumpeter in the school band I, in a couple of years, was student conductor. I played varsity football, I was part of the popular set, and yet I was always a loner. That was temperamental, and it made for certain di culties. I guess I lived far too much in books, or took books far too seriously, to allow some of my schoolmates to feel comfortable.

But my own role was inside and outside. And it continued to be that way. I was never really shy, but I was never one of those individuals who had absolute approval; nor did I want it.

“Now I’ve studied enough of the lives of writers and other artists to know that it costs you something to function in this eld with any sort of individuality. I know that the pressures toward conformity are not just

imposed by whites; they are part of the defense mechanism of the black community itself. Years ago, when I was in the Federal Writers' Project and was just beginning to write, there were friends of mine, some of whom were also in the Project, who happened to be at a party. It was reported to me afterwards that my name came up, and they decided, then and there, that I would never write anything. Now it isn't just that these people were not in the position to judge, because I can say quite frankly that not too many of them knew much about writing. But somehow they made the decision that I was never going to produce anything. This friend came and told me about it, and we had a big laugh. But I was hurt, I won't deny that, because they weren't giving me a goddamn chance! And yet already I was publishing in the *New Masses* and the *New Republic* and slowly trying to nd where I was going. Later I realized that this activity was a way of protecting them from being too ambitious. What they were saying was, 'He's too damn ambitious.' Well, maybe I was. But I think that we should be more generous.

"I also know this: whether you really have achieved anything or not, in this country we are so under the spell of publicity that if your name appears a little bit too frequently you're going to become a target.

"I responded to Irving Howe in that way because these issues go beyond *me*. They become important for young black writers who are trying to orient themselves. I'm just saying to them that there is something about their experience which other people might tend to overlook because they're outside it. I'm saying that I'm in a better position to see certain things about American literature or American culture precisely *because* I'm a black man, but I'm not restricted by those frames which have been imposed upon us. I think that one has to keep this constantly in mind; otherwise, somebody else is going to be interpreting your experience for you, and you're going to be repeating it. And they might be in error."

Presently, as part of the increased public and academic interest in literature written by blacks, there is a movement under way to reevaluate the position of Richard Wright. And, because of the double standard of criticism, Wright's work is not measured against the works of his peers *(Native Son* was published in 1940, along with John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and

Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls),* but against the works of James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. So in order for Wright's legend to rise on the black scale, the esteem of Baldwin and Ellison must be lowered.

Consequently, a review in the May 8, 1970, issue of *Life* magazine, called, honestly enough, "Black Fiction: A Second Look," suggested that "Ellison himself, and James Baldwin after him, both helped to create the image of Wright as a novelist too much given to social protest, too preoccupied with one level of black society and too constrained by the limitations of his brutish protagonist really to qualify as a master." The author, a mysterious critic named Cli ord Mason, notes that much of the "grandiloquent praise" of Wright's accomplishments by black writers issues from a "strong reaction to

the obsequious bleatings of white appeasement that has characterized Ellison's politics."

Ellison admits that this sort of thing annoys him. "But here," he says, "I was just as annoyed by the fact that this man calls himself a teacher and a critic, and he hasn't done his homework. I never wrote a review of *Native Son,* nor did I ever call Bigger Thomas a brute. Nor did I lead the attack on *Native Son*. I was Wright's best man," he says, nostalgia clearly in his voice, his head turned toward the Hudson. "I led to the reconciliation between Wright and his wife. I think my essay on *Black Boy* is a tribute to Wright, and I've praised his achievements in any number of places." Now his tone is severe; his head shifts back to the room. "But somehow this man wanted to set up something. And what he knows about my politics, I don't know. I've been criticized because I was *not* political.

Privately," he says, his voice steady but rising, "*my politics are my own!* I'm *not* a spokesman. I'm *not* a politician. And I've very, very carefully tried to avoid pretending to be what I am not. But that kind of thing is cheap. Whatever the quarrel between Wright and Baldwin was, I don't think that it should be generalized into a principle. People meet, people exchange ideas, and hopefully the exchange is creative. Sometimes it isn't; but why kill o someone? I wrote a review of Langsten Hughes's *The Big Sea* and was very critical of it. I think that it hurt him a little, but it was not a vicious review. It was a considered review, written as well as I could at the time.

But I never felt the need to attack Langsten Hughes to raise up Ralph Ellison. *I* could never *be* a Langsten Hughes, no matter how good he became or how poor he became as an artist. I can only be myself. So that I don't have to envy other people. It seems to me a waste of time and a discredit to oneself."

MCPHERSON: "In the novel *The Outsider*, Richard Wright seems to have attempted a sort of projection of the possibilities which would become available to American black writers as our people gained greater participation in the society. In the novel a white district attorney says to Cross Damon, 'Negroes, as they enter our culture,

are going to inherit the problems we have, but with a di erence.

They are outsiders and they are going to *know* that they have these problems. They are going to be selfconscious; they are going to be gifted with a double vision, for, being Negroes, they are going to be both *inside* and *outside* of our culture at the same time. Every emotional and cultural convulsion that ever shook the heart and soul of Western man will shake them. Negroes will develop unique and specially de ned psychological types. They will become psychological men, like the Jews. They will not only be Americans or Negroes; they will be centers of *knowing*, so to speak. The political, social and psychological consequences of this will be enormous.' Considering the quality of the ction presently being produced by black writers, do you think that Wright's prediction was accurate?"

ELLISON: "This is one of the greatest advantages of being black; you have a perspective which is fairly uncluttered if you will use it. By being in it and outside you can evaluate. Housekeepers, bellhops, domestics, have done this for *years*. You can listen to women talk about what happens in the white family. They're not always malicious in their discussions, but they have a standard, and they can see. And they're wise in certain ways; they're wise in the ways of human folly and aspiration. This isn't limited by color. But in terms of their position in the social hierarchy, they were outside but right in the *bedroom*. So what better position can you have? A *psychiatrist* doesn't have that advantage of observation.

"Wright was right. We have that, and have always had it.

American writers have not yet learned to use what has been available to us: that listening post, that point of observation, which puts one in the position of making judgments, of seeing, or of exercising sympathy. And the suspicion of this haunted whites in the South. That's why they're just as obsessed with what Negroes are doing. That's what's not talked about. But, they have as much curiosity about how the maid is faring and what Negroes do.

"But this is an opportunity to make judgments and to use the imagination. One problem that I've always felt as a writer was the restriction placed on me by my racial status to be in those areas where important decisions are arrived at. And what I nd most ironic about the separatist positions taken by black students is that they are removing themselves from those areas where they can observe and even participate in the formation of values on the part of their white fellow students.

"When we study the lives of the great writers by social class, or by function, we nd that they were in the position to observe from the very top of the society to the very bottom. Dickens moved among the very top people of England while he was studying the abuses of child labor. Cervantes was in prison most of his life, and when he was not, he moved in the circle of clericals. Stendhal had that same advantage. I don't know of any European writer who didn't manage to do some of this. And in our own country the Hemingways certainly had access to the top intellectual and artistic circles and, when they wanted it, to political circles. This was true of Faulkner, and right down the line. Well, this isn't just for fun. These are positions of observation, positions where values can be studied in action. And *we* have to do *more* of that. We have to project the imagination.

"One reason why I tell black kids to read novels is that we've been choked o from knowing how society operates. And often American novels, even those we don't think so highly of, do tell us something about the dilemmas of people and institutions, of areas of American life from which we are restricted because of our race. So that one of the main objectives of black writers certainly should be to *use* that gift in disguise which has been given us through the history of segregation.

“You see, what happens in this country is that many of us come from the South or the Southwest or the Midwest. And we come to New York or we go to the West Coast, and we’re sort of processed; we’re kind of stylized, blacks and whites alike. Much of what gets into American literature gets there because so much is left out. I think the problems of the writings of a man like Wright Morris come

precisely because he has written so extensively about a little-known part of the United States in a very understated way. He’s a very good writer, but people don’t really know enough about the reality out of which he writes to make them fully appreciate what he’s doing. I think that this happens over and over again and builds a need in the minds of writers, even those who become successful, to have *more* information, to have imaginative projections of the great variety of the country. That’s a central problem of American literature. Always has been. Under the great emphasis on the novel of manners what do you get? You get Jewish boys whose parents were peasants often assuming the values of Boston mandarins. I’ve always found this ironic, and yet I can’t overlook the fact that some of them did this very well. America is a country in which these strange transformations occur, and can be made to occur consciously, even though often we end up like Gatsby, following the wrong green light under the wrong name.”

Ellison is still a rst novelist, despite his reputation. And that one novel was published over eighteen years ago. He contributes a steady ow of articles to intellectual journals and periodicals, and scholars and critics are rapidly making a permanent place for him in the archives of American literary criticism. But while students continue to read and his critics continue to write, there is the expectation of his long-awaited second novel. So far he has read from it in universities and on public television, published sections of it in intellectual journals, allowed a few close friends to read some of it, and has remained strangely silent about publication of the rest.

Inestimable numbers of people, black and white, in and out of universities, friends and enemies, await the publication of the complete novel. Whenever his name is mentioned among a group of writers or literati, the immediate response is, “When is his novel coming out?” One man has heard that he has pulled it back from his publisher again for more revisions; another says

that Ellison worries about its being dated; a third says he has heard that Ellison cannot nish it.

Concerning that novel there are many other stories. Perhaps the best one is that which some friends of the Ellisons supposedly heard from the writer's wife. "She says she hears him in his study at night, turning pages and laughing to himself. He enjoys the book so much that he isn't in a hurry to share it with the public."

Whether or not this is true, Ellison is extremely reluctant, at rst, to discuss the book. A re in his summer home in Plain eld, Massachusetts, destroyed a year's worth of revisions, he says, and he is presently in the process of revising it again. "I want what I do to be good," he says.

"Are you worried about the quality of it?"

"No," he says. "But you want to be sure when you write so slowly, because if it's not good, if it's just passable, they'll be terribly disappointed."

He has enough typed manuscripts to publish three novels, but is worried over how the work will hold up as a total structure. He does not want to publish three separate books, but then he does not want to compromise on anything essential. "If I nd that it is better to make it a three-section book, to issue it in three volumes, I would do that as long as I thought that each volume had a compelling interest in itself. But it seems to me that one of the decisions one has to make about long ction is whether the e ect of *reading* it is lengthy.

If you don't get the impression that you're reading a long thing, then you've licked the problem of the battle of time."

The setting of the novel, he says, is roughly around 1955. The form of it, he says, chuckling to himself, is in the direction of a

"realism extended beyond realism." There are several time schemes operating within it, and the sections already published heavily suggest that it is complexly involved with the Negro church and its ritual. In fact, three of its major characters, Bliss, Eatmore, and Hickman, are ministers.

On an afternoon, after a martini and before dinner, if the ow of conversation has been relaxing, and if the mood is right, Ellison might read a few sections from the book. It may take him a while to thumb through several huge black-bound manuscripts, perhaps numbering thousands of pages, to nd an appropriate section. But

when he does begin to read there is the impression, from the way the rhythms rise and fall and blend and ow out of him, that he is proud of every word. He chuckles as he reads, stops to explain certain references, certain connections, certain subtle jokes about the minister whose sermon he is reading. And in those sermons his voice becomes that of a highly sophisticated black minister, merging sharp biblical images with the deep music of his voice, playing with your ears, evoking latent memories of heated Southern churches and foot-stomping and fanning ladies in long white dresses and sweating elders swaying in the front rows. And suddenly the sermons are no longer comic, and there is no writer reading from his work. You see a minister, and you feel the depth of his religion, and you are only one soul in a huge congregation of wandering souls hearing him ask, over and over, *"Oh Yes, Yes, Yes, Yes, Yes. DO You Love, Ah DO You Love?"*

Berkeley, California

June, 1970

Dear Ralph:

You once stated in an interview that American Negro culture is expressed in a certain dramaturgy which is generally unrecognized as such because it is still tied to the more folkish Negro churches ("Some Negro Preachers are great showmen"). It is my belief that since the church plays a major part in his life, the Southern black is closer to his cultural institutions, his evolved values and way of life than his Northern brother. His relationships are far more organic and whole than the fragmented relationships found among blacks in the North.

But since the church as this kind of institution is largely restricted to the South, what other areas are available for Northern black writers to study the

values of our people? Also, do you think that a Southern background gives a black writer, who is concerned with the Southern black aspects of American culture, pronounced advantages over his fellow black writer who was raised in the North?

ELLISON: “I would think that people working in the theater would be experimenting with anything and everything which is available in an attempt to forge useful dramatic forms. One way would be to

take the theatrical activities of the Nationalist Movement in Irish letters, Sean O’Casey and Yeats, and see what we can learn from them as a way of utilizing the dramatic forms implicit in the black community. We know that we have the church; we know that the ritual is Episcopalian, modi ed by the Negro idiom. We know that in lodge ceremonies or other secret and public ceremonies there are rituals which have been put together from many places. It would seem to me that we could abstract from these if we studied them and looked at them as ritual, as theater, and not just as a bunch of Negroes having a good time or burying their dead.

“There are certain forms which have been repeated and proved valid, if only through the fact that they have existed for so many years. That is a place to study. Anywhere you get our people gathered together for ceremonial purposes has something to tell us about drama, about what we could use as drama. For example, I see certain of these fellows getting into the life of bars where people gather. I know that there is a sort of ritual pattern: certain things are discussed at certain times; certain people come at certain times; certain things are not discussed when one group of people is there.

A certain atmosphere will prevail after football games or after someone has made a big numbers hit. You have many of these patterns which no one has done anything with.

“Now, in terms of capturing the idiom, we are not restricted to the stage. When you’re dealing with oral tonalities you need bodies and you need the stage. But when you start translating this kind of thing into speech, you do what Joyce did, I think that he has a lot to teach us, especially in *Finnegans Wake*. It’s annoying at rst, but when you get into it you begin to see how he plays with rhythms, how he will extrapolate from popular songs and

everything else. The problem is that you're not going to put the actual sound on paper, but you can evoke it. Or you can study the verbal play of Negro children, who can do a hell of a lot with words and sounds. So much of this is highly rhythmical precisely because the intellectual content is not too great, and you have models for translating this into prose forms. When I was on the Writers' Project I worked on a subproject collecting folklore. I went into hundreds of apartments

and talked to people about folklore and took some of the stu down.

Often I was able to get it on paper by using a kind of Hemingway typography, by using the repetitions. I couldn't quite get the tone of the sounds in, but I could get some of the patterns and get an idea of what it was like. One of the things said over and over again by people who have read *Invisible Man* is that they can hear the di erence in talk, in the speech patterns between Ras and Tarp. And this is a matter of playing with the rhythms, indicating pronunciation without falling into an attempt at the transcription of dialect.

"As for the possibility of a deeper understanding of cultural values and institutions on the part of Southern blacks, I will just say that it's dangerous to generalize in this area. One man brought up in the North who has done his homework as far as reading is concerned and who has that *respect* for the mysteries of black cultural experiences in the South—to which he is not necessarily superior because he enjoyed a broader social freedom in the North—might well make *more* of that Southern experience than a writer who is so caught up in it that he doesn't achieve objectivity. On the other hand, I believe that a black Southern writer who does know his traditions has some of the advantages which William Faulkner or other white Southern writers have had: the advantage of contact with a long accumulation of history in a given place; an experience which has been projected in other forms of artistic expression, which has traditional values and variants, and which has been re ned by being *de ned* by generations of people who have told what it seemed to be. *'This is the life of black men here. These are the variations. This type of character turns up over and over again.'* For example, you get many guys who nickname themselves *Jack the Bear* or *Peter Wheatstraw*.

“What we have in the South is an oral tradition which extends right back into slavery and which has been projected in terms of archetypal characters: John the Slave, John Henry, Stagolee, a whole group of them, and they’re real-life versions of local characters. People know them by word of mouth rather than their having been written about. For example, a man like Kingsberry who

shot up a whole bunch of Texas Rangers in Oklahoma City when Jimmy Rushing was a little boy. People still talk about Kingsberry.

And fabulous shermen, fabulous hunters, fabulous bootleggers, fabulous cooks, fabulous headwaiters, fabulous hustling bellhops, fabulous evangelists. I can go south now and mention an evangelist named McDu y whom I knew when I was about ve years old, and there’ll be people who know about McDu y.

“This is one of the advantages of the South. In the stories you get the texture of an experience and the projection of values, and the distillation of a kind of wisdom. And this must never be laughed at or rejected, because this was precisely what Shakespeare was doing when he wrote his historical plays; it is what Aeschylus and others were doing when they wrote their plays, because these things go back to myth. This is one of our great heritages, but we haven’t learned how to get the most out of it. One way of getting the most out of it is to recognize that these gures are universal; they are our versions of universal gures who repeat the broader patterns of human life on this earth. And we can see the human implications of them when we put them side by side with some of these great characters. In some essay I point out that if you put John Henry beside Hercules, they’re the same gure given the di erences between the cultures out of which they come; they’re both men with clubs, they’re both heroes capable of fabulous feats of strength, and they’ re both sacri cial heroes because they die to a rm something about human life.”

“Stephen’s [Daedalus] problem,” Ellison wrote in *Invisible Man*,

“like ours, was not actually one of creating the uncreated conscience of his race, but of creating the *uncreated features of his face*.” Ellison is fty-six. His face does not show very much of it, but enough is visible. He has a

receding hairline, a broad forehead, and deep curved lines on either side of his nose running down to the corners of his mouth. It is a handsome brown face, from either point of view, and there is a healthy stubbornness, besides all else inside that forehead, which helps him to protect it. The face can be cold, severe, analytical, pensive, even smiling. But it is not going to change.

Berkeley, California

June, 1970

Dear Ralph:

Some of the bravest words ever written by an artist are these: “But there is also an American Negro tradition which teaches one to de ect racial provocation and to master and contain pain. It is a tradition which abhors as obscene any trading on one’s own anguish for gain or sympathy, which springs not from a desire to deny the harshness of existence but from a will to deal with it as men at their best have always done. It takes fortitude to be a man, and no less to be an artist. Perhaps it takes even more if the black man would be an artist. If so, there are no exemptions.” Considering this pain, and considering what it has done to certain of your fellow black writers, what have you done that they did not do which has helped you to survive as an artist? Have you ever revised your *credo* in the eighteen years since publication of *Invisible Man?*

How have you been able to maintain that double discipline as artist and Negro?

ELLISON: “No, I haven’t revised my feelings about those words. Maybe I’ve gone on to generalize them. I think that at our best we’ve contained our pain. We didn’t like to have white folks see us crying.

I was in Jackson, Mississippi, recently, and one thing a fellow kept saying was, “My father had his own home, and he didn’t let any *goddamn* white insurance man come *around!’* He was also saying that what was in his home was his own private business, and it was to be kept there.

“I don’t think that I’m in a position to discuss the pain of other writers. Individuals deal with it as they can. But I *do* say that sometimes you can get so *uptight* about your *dis* advantages that you ignore your advantages. And sometimes we are encouraged to talk about how bad we’ve been treated, and this becomes a sort of perverse titillation for white people. It has this negative e ect: a man who is a very elegant and eloquent man, a very gifted man, begins to overemphasize his disadvantages as a *black man* and nally sets up a reaction. Someone will say, ‘Well, goddamnit, what’s he complaining about? This was *good* for him. I’m out here slugging in the rat race, and he’s a celebrity. What the hell *is* this?’ It

happens that way. But you’d better be objective about what you’re doing if you want to have some sort of psychic peace.

“I notice that over and over again some of our black writers treat whites as though they were *omniscient*, requiring a perfection of them which we don’t have ourselves and which, in the South, whites have tried to pretend they have. That’s insanity. I want to say, ‘Look damnit! Don’t you know who that *is?* His father was a small-time groceryman who struggled to send him to school. And he’s learned a few things. It didn’t transform him into any great humanist or into any great sophisticated intellectual. This is only a *relative* matter.

You’re dealing with a man who still doesn’t know what to do when he goes to the opera or a football game, and who would be completely lost if he had to go to a dice game, so don’t overrate him.’

“A writer writes out of his own family background, out of his own immediate community, during his formative period. And he writes out of his own talent and his own individual vision. Now if he doesn’t, if he tries to get away from that by bending it to some ideological line, then he is depriving the group of his uniqueness. W

hat we need is individuals. If the white society has tried to do anything to us, it has tried to keep us from being individuals.

There’s no reason why the individual can’t be a member of the group. And, incidentally, the people who make the greatest cry against individuals are

themselves trying to be leaders. You can't miss *this* irony. They're doing all they can to suppress all individuality except their own. This is *nonsense*. This we do not need. We need as many individuals developing their individual talents as possible, *but* dedicating some part of their energies to the experience of the group. And damnit, I've *done* that. I've always written out of a sense of the group experience as ltered through my individual experiences, talent, and vision. And I think this kind of accommodation has to be made. In fact, it's inexcusable. We can be proud of Duke Ellington and Johnny Hodges, we can be proud of any number of people, but we're proud of them not because they were anonymous bumps within the crowd, but because they were themselves.

"I think that now a very articulate group of young writers doesn't quite know what to make of me. I'm standing up there—speaking in terms of metaphor now—like a black militant leader with his bodyguard. I don't have a bodyguard, but there's nothing like that to compel people to see if they can't knock you o . I think that since I have not embraced some of their literary theories, they feel that I am the enemy. My position has always been that ideology is one thing. Show me what you make of it. If you make art out of it, I will praise the art even while I argue with the ideology. But I haven't seen enough of the art. I suspect that I have annoyed a few people by insisting upon the mastery of craft. Craft to me is an aspect of morality. I don't mean that I've mastered it. I think that this irritates some writers and makes them think, 'That guy, he thinks he's so good.' Well, that's not what I'm talking about. Everytime I walk into my study or into another room of books down the hall I see the great masters. *They're* the ones I have to measure myself against, not because I want to but because that's what is stuck up there. Those are the standards. *I* didn't create them; they were there. Lord knows it would be much easier if you didn't have to work out of a knowledge of what had gone before.

"These arguments over theory will continue. It bothers me to see this generation repeating so many of the mistakes which were around during the 1930s and 1940s. Sometimes these people can be as aggressive in their attacks on writers as the Communists were.

“Well, so what? I’ve been a Negro-American—a black American if you will—for a hell of a long time, and I know one thing to be true: we haven’t changed that much.”

*In the “The World and the Jug” Ellison defends his right to an individual vision against

critic Irving Howe, who, in his essay “Black Boys and Native Sons,” assessed the merits of Wright, Baldwin, and Ellison as “black writers.” The essay appears on page 155.

JAMES ARMISTEAD LAFAYETTE

Ellison wrote this essay about a slave and little-known hero of the American Revolution in 1914 for the U.S. Bicentennial Society’s Pro le of Patriots. *For reasons of space, this text—what he called “the longer and more meaningful version”—was not included in the volume. It appears in print here for the rst time.*

AT Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, there hangs a portrait in which the Marquis de Lafayette is attended by a black man.

Rendered by John-Baptiste Paon, the painting commemorates the victorious Siege of Yorktown. In the center of its canvas, attired in the uniform of a general of the Continental Army, the young French aristocrat points with enigmatic expression to the site of that climactic struggle in the War of Independence. He is hatless, his powdered wig showing white against a cloudy sky in which a slight rift promises sunny days ahead.

To his left, gripping the bridle of a spirited horse in black-gloved hands, stands his devoted body-servant and orderly, James Armistead. Following a convention of such portraiture, Paon has intensi ed the hierarchical, master-servant symbolism of his composition by rendering the black orderly’s features so abstract, stylized, and shadowy that the viewer’s attention is drawn not to the individuality of Armistead’s features but to the theatrical splendor of his costume.

Dark-skinned and muscular, Armistead is dressed in skintight breeches and handsome boots. He is armed with a ne sword and wears a silken sash and neckerchief. His jacket's cu s and borders are trimmed with satin. A wide-brimmed hat, plumed with ostrich feathers, covers his massive head, and in the lobe of his left ear the gleam of a golden earring evokes European fantasies of exotic blackamoors. Truly, the Florentine splendor of his garb adds glamour and mystery even to Lafayette, who is at once a wealthy French aristocrat, an American patriot, and a triumphant general.

Indeed, Armistead is clothed so exotically and his delineation is so stylized that it is as though, possessing no tradition that would allow him to visualize realistically (much less project) a black American of such incongruous status—socially a slave, and yet a ghter for American independence—the artist has sought guidance from the theater or from the *Arabian Nights*. Thus, while Lafayette and his horse are drawn realistically, the shadowy Armistead appears a gure of fable, perhaps a lesser noble who has strayed to the New

World after accompanying the blacker of the Three Wise Men to Bethlehem.

In reality James Armistead was far from a gure of fantasy. An Afro-American slave, he was the property of William Armistead of Virginia, and whether the artist intended it or not, the theatrical note introduced into the scene by James's costume was justi ed symbolically by the role of make-believe that the slave had played at Yorktown. James Armistead was an important American spy and a ghter in the struggle for freedom within a struggle for freedom that was the American Negro's view of that revolution.

In July 1775, when George Washington took command of the Continental armies, he banned the further enlistment of Negroes.

Ignoring the fact that black Americans, both slave and free, had fought against the British from the beginning of the rebellion, Washington's policy enacted an increasing concern over the implications of Negroes bearing arms and risking their lives under the banner and slogans of the Revolution. So perplexing did the issue become that on September 26, 1775, Edward Rutledge of South Carolina moved in the Continental Congress for the

discharging of all Negroes then serving in the army, and on October 8 a council of war, headed by Washington, agreed to reject all Negroes from military service, whether slave or free. The contradiction of struggling for democracy while maintaining the institution of slavery had caught re as a political issue, and this policy was an ill-considered e ort at a solution. Denying Afro-Americans the right to continue ghting for the new nation's independence was designed to avoid the possibility of having to deal with a Negro population that could justify its demand for citizenship on the ground of military service. Nor was it comfortable to contemplate the possibility of living with large numbers of disgruntled Negroes who were familiar with weapons and trained in military tactics.

In light of the struggling nation's military predicament, however, this policy turned out to re ect not only a awed moral position and political naïveté, but a poverty of military imagination. For in the Americans' exclusion of Negroes the British saw, and quickly

seized, a political opportunity with important military consequences. Thus, on November 7, 1775, Lord Dunmore, the governor of Virginia, issued a proclamation o ering freedom to all

"indentured servants or others … that are able and willing to bear arms," a move that proved so alarmingly e ective that by December 26, 1775, General Washington was complaining in a letter to Richard Henry Lee that Dunmore's strength was increasing "as a snowball, by rolling," and that "if some expedient [was not] hit upon to convince the slaves and servants of the impotency of

[Dunmore's] design" he would become the Revolution's most formidable enemy. Reacting to the loss of thousands of ghting men, Washington reversed his policy to the extent of enlisting *free* Negroes, while urgent e orts were made to win the support of slaves with promises of better treatment, and by o ering pardons to all Negroes then serving the enemy. Fortunately the appeal of democracy was broader than Washington's foresight; most Negroes were either loyal or neutral, and it was after this reversal of American policy that James Armistead made the move that won him a place, no matter how shadowy, in Paon's portrait of Lafayette.

The time was March 1781. In Virginia General Lafayette was commanding forces pitted against the British under General Cornwallis, to whose victory over General Gates in South Carolina black enlistees had contributed. Trying desperately to raise four hundred laborers, teamsters, and cavalry mounts, Lafayette advised Washington that "nothing but a treaty of alliance with the Negroes can nd us dragoon horses [because] it is by this means the enemy have so formidable a Cavalry." It was during this period, with Cornwallis still formidable, and the Americans' seeking intelligence about his strength and strategy, that James Armistead sought his master's permission to join Lafayette. His owner willing, Armistead enlisted and served the future hero of the French Revolution so e ectively that after the war the general was to state that his spying activities were "industriously collected and more faithfully delivered. He perfectly acquitted himself with … important commissions … [and was] entitled to every reward his situation [his owner and the American government willing] could admit of."

The brevity of Lafayette's testimonial understated his orderlyspy's resourcefulness. Taking advantage of the British eagerness for Negro aid, Armistead risked his life by pretending to supply Cornwallis with information damaging to the Americans—a bit of playacting that proved so e ective that not until the defeated Cornwallis encountered him in Lafayette's headquarters was the black man's true loyalty and identity revealed.

The rest is irony. In 1786, Armistead, who by now expressed continuing admiration for the marquis by calling himself "James Armistead Lafayette," was rewarded for his services to the Revolution by being emancipated at the

expense of the General Assembly of Virginia. In 1818, still free but little changed in circumstances, the old ex-spy successfully petitioned the state for relief, acquiring after thirty years a veteran's pension. The incongruity of his position, however, was unchanged. He was a recognized veteran of the Revolution and a free man, but not a citizen. Nevertheless, he had emerged somewhat from the symbolic shadow in which he stands in the Paon portrait, and in 1824, during Lafayette's visit to Virginia following the French Revolution, Armistead's now aging features were to share a bit more of the general's sun. For once again James Armistead Lafayette's image was committed to canvas, this time by John B. Martin, an artist as skilled in delineating a revolutionary veteran who was a former slave and spy as one who, like John Marshall, would become Secretary of State and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. In Martin's portrait, Armistead, the former spy, is no longer clothed in fantasy. Proud and digni ed, he appears with his highly individualized features forcefully drawn, a dark, ruggedly handsome man looking out at the viewer with quizzical expression. A rmistead wears a white neck cloth, and his blue military coat is adorned with bright buttons embossed with the American eagle. Asserting an individual identity earned at the repeated risk of his life and o ering an unshakable faith in the ideal of democracy, James Armistead Lafayette's portrait now hangs in the Valentine Museum at Richmond.

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS AT THE COLLEGE OF

WILLIAM AND MARY

During the sixties and seventies Ellison delivered a number of commencement addresses. This one, given at the College of William and Mary in 1912, explores the peculiar continuities of ritual, race and change in American experience. It appears in print here for the rst time.

MR. President, members of the Board of Visitors, honored guests, members of the faculty, and the William and Mary class of 1972. If there are those among the members of the graduating class who feel uncomfortable out there in the sun, let me assure you that you are not alone. Nor should you be surprised by the fact. For you have been undergoing an initiation, a rite of passage. Here in a setting and atmosphere which resounds and echoes with tradition, new identities have been conferred upon you. With us here is a

member of the highest court of the land and the governor of the state of Virginia. Here are representatives of the sciences, and of course illustrious members of the academic community. Here we have heard stirring patriotic music and the sweet music of young voices raised in song. Here we are surrounded by banners and ags, by friends and family. Present here, in fact, is everything necessary to make this a high and transcendent moment.

None of this, of course, is unusual in such a place as Colonial Williamsburg, because these very stones make us abundantly aware of tradition. If, however, we were to go back a few years into the history of mankind, instead of my standing here with my own face exposed, I would be wearing a ritual mask; my role in this ceremony of initiation would require it. And the mask itself would contain frightening features designed to remind you of serious things: of the past and of those terrors which are an inevitable part of human existence. Indeed, perhaps it is one of the most interesting achievements of American culture to have made it unnecessary for me to wear, on such a hot day, a ritual mask. Because, you see, it is an established part of all such rites of passage that the initiate be made aware that his moment of transcendent glory, his moment of joy, is also one which involves the most serious values of the tribe.

It is the function of such masks to remind us that the spirits, the ghosts of the honored dead, are present on the scene. And in the presence of such terrifying images as are symbolized by the mask, the initiate is tested as to his ability to endure pain and his suitability for ful lling the new role which he is about to assume. In our culture, during this moment of history, it is not required that I

wear such a mask, but a painful testing is still required and I, I’m afraid you are aware, have been given the role of in icting the pain.

Yet it is a symbolic pain, and if my maskless presence evokes values and di culties which such ritual masks are intended to evoke, then you must understand that as a writer I feel the pain and di culties which you feel even more painfully. Because, you see, it was here several hundred years ago that certain ideas were rst enunciated by those honored men who preceded you as graduates of William and Mary. These were men who forged, or helped to forge, what I speak of as the “sacred documents” of this nation—the

Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. So that if there is a relationship between a historical scene and the words uttered and documented there, then certainly for one who is an American writer this is a sacred place. I say “sacred”

because no matter what his ideology, no matter what his racial or religious background happens to be, the writer recognizes that the underlying motives of American literature were rst expressed here by those rash and dissenting young men who bore such illustrious names as Washington and Je erson and Madison. You know this better than I do; if not, it is one of the purposes of this transcendent moment to remind you of your ties to these honored predecessors and to their ideals.

In such a sacred place, on such a ceremonial occasion as this, an American writer cannot but realize that he is stuck with the ideals which were proclaimed before the world in these sacred documents.

And as in the case of the original utterers of those words, those daring forgers of our sacred documents of state, they cause him a great deal of discomfort. Because, you see, those predecessors of yours did more than create beautiful rhetoric. They made magic.

With their words and deeds they laid upon all of us an obligation to consciousness and conscience. By which I mean an obligation to be consciously aware of the ideals to which they had committed us, and conscientiously concerned with making their ideas manifest in the quality of this nation’s life. In the very severing of their ritual ties with England through acts of war, through the severing of their ties of kinship with the English and their negating of all that had

been considered sacred in their traditional ties, they thrust upon those of us who were to come upon this scene the obligation of carrying out and ful lling that vision of democratic freedom which they had conceived, fought for, and made sacred through acts of courage, sacri ce, and bloodshed.

Here was an elite of intellectuals—educated men whose vision of freedom was not con ned to the interests of their own class, but who saw the need for universal education as an agency in the ful llment of their social vision.

These were men who by way of making certain that Americans could understand one another in carrying out the imperative of the democratic vision insisted that the new nation adopt a uniform method of spelling. This, in order that New Englanders and Southerners could at least understand one another on the printed page. The Founding Fathers spoke the same language, but even then with regional accents. Nor should you forget that in this section of the new nation there were a lot of *my* ancestors who were lending their particular music to the English language. So in the new nation universal education and spelling bees were instituted. What a country! What a marvelously unformed country, wherein the social ritual of the spelling bee could be used as an agency for achieving social and political cohesion. Yes, and wherein the spelling of words in a uniform way could be used to instill and revitalize the sacred principles of the democratic faith.

What a marvelously open, challenging and hopeful world of new possibilities!

Ah, but there was a aw in their hopeful project of nation building—and we all know it. We know it because it has shaped the present. It is a aw which shapes the drama that underlies your drama of initiation, giving it an undercurrent of uncertainty and threat. It is that aw which renders my presence here today meaningful in terms other than my role as writer. And it is that aw which makes my role resonantly symbolic despite the absence of a fright-inspiring ritual mask.

For we know that in the very discussions out of which our sacred documents were drawn up, a war of words broke out. There was contention between the Founding Fathers over the distribution of

authority and property. But more important, there was a contention over the very concept of freedom, over its breadth and limits, and over who was to share and not share its promises. Indeed, over the nature of human identity itself. The war of words continued for some eighty years; it grew hot, and from a mere war of words it erupted into a war of arms. That costly and disillusioning war formed a chastening moment of our history and cast a shadow upon the lives of millions yet unborn. It formed that fateful moment wherein we glimpsed the tragic implications of our democratic faith.

It was a moment during which tens of thousands of young men from both sides of the Mason-Dixon line were killed (in which they were joined by many of my own people), and it marked the nation's awakening to what lay ahead for all of us. It was a fateful moment during which the future was formed.

In dealing with this new awareness we improvised, just as Americans, having forsaken tradition, have always done. We "made do" as we could, and soon the war that was settled in military terms owed back to become a contention of words again. And with this came the development of elaborate rituals of exclusion enforced by violence, a reversal of that bright hopefulness concerning the possibility of mankind, really a reduction of it —and you know that story (which is the story of the post-Reconstruction). What is important to remember here today is that in that moment of disenchantment the country was so blessed by natural resources, so blessed by inventive and fertile imaginations, so blessed by that great stretch of land which lay to the west, that we could temporize our new sense of democratic ideals by developing techniques of avoidance.

Americans are known as a people without memory. Americans are known as a people who take things lightly, just as we tend to take such ceremonies as this in which we are engaged as one of reward.

It is assumed that you are being paid o for having completed certain necessary work, and some of you have completed that work with great brilliance and verve. But this ceremony is not simply one of reward. I'm sorry, but my role here is to inform you that rewards notwithstanding, this is indeed a rite of preparation. Because the

world into which you go now is a world which came into being as a result of what the Founding Fathers were unable to bring themselves to do, and of what those who made peace after the Civil War, or the War Between the States, were unable to do. And the state of the world into which you are about to enter isn't just a matter of laws. It is also a matter of the spiritual quality of our American principles and the manner in which they infuse not only our words and our laws, but the arrangements of our cities, the quality of our education and the disposition of our neighborhoods.

No, the moral con ict which marks the world into which you go was present even in our sacred documents of state, even in the clerical forms which made it possible for our bureaucracies to get on with their work. So you see, even though we could look away from certain unpleasant moral realities, they did not go away. They were woven into the texture of our society. They remained to color even our most sublime gestures. And as surely as the values stated in our sacred documents were compelling and all-pervasive, and as surely as they were being made a living reality in the social structure, such people as were excluded from the rewards and promises of that social structure would rise up and insist on being included. Such people as were brutalized and designated a role beneath the social hierarchy were sure to rise up, and with the same rhetoric and in the name of the same sacred principles, accuse the nation and insist upon a recti cation.

I would like to think that we have come to grips with that problem, and the indications here are that we have. Our forefathers created a civilization of quantity—of such quantity that much of the mystery has gone out of life. Perhaps because ours is such a mobile society, one in which change comes rapidly, one in which there is such a multiplicity of events that in order to protect ourselves we take on a stance, a posture of cynicism. Yes, but the old sacred words still work within us. Morality still claims us, because these words in whose name we act were made luminous by human sacri ce, with the shedding of blood. We are not so sophisticated that we are able to throw that o . So now, as I say, we have a society, a civilization, of quantity in which all may be well fed and

clothed, and given the opportunity to achieve their own best possibilities. The world into which you are about to enter is such a world, and I can think of no generation of graduates of the College of William and Mary in Virginia which is better able to deal with the problems of such a world.

For you know something of your opposite numbers. You do not have to ask yourselves, “Is the black man an American?”

You do not have to ask yourselves whether the melting pot melts

—because it has indeed melted. We are united by the principles enunciated by those young men who preceded you here as graduates so long ago.

We are united in the language we speak.

We are united in the national cultural style and in all of its manifestations.

We are united, certainly, on the eld of athletics.

But best of all, we are better able to think together about the cost of the daring and heroic dream which made this country. We know

—you know—that no man lives simply his own life. He lives in great part the lives of his ancestors, of his parents. He lives the lives of his children and the lives of those who are to follow them. He lives but a small part of his life for himself. What you are able to do today, what Virginia and the College of William and Mary have been making it possible for you to do, is to live your *own* life. That is not to be irreverent to the ties of the past, but to understand its tragic dimensions and to take on that conscious awareness as you try to make *your* way and as you try to deal with the di culties which are common to all men and women.

We do not bury the past, because it is within us. But we *do* modify the past as we live our own lives. And because of this we are now able to resuscitate in all its boldness, and with great sophistication, that conscious and conscientious concern for others which is the essence of the American ideal. I would remind you, however, that we are a nation that plays it by ear. We are inventive both in creating sublime visions and in copping out on them. These too are a part of the human response.

Now, in completing my unusual role, I want to thank you for having invited me here. I want to thank you for giving an American writer a renewed sense of the complexity of change, the resurrection of hope, the continuing presence of courage, and that old American desire to move on and to make things a little better.

ADDRESS TO THE HARVARD COLLEGE ALUMNI, CLASS

OF 1949

In this address Ellison uses his namesake, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the mystery and sacri ce of the Civil War to ground his meditation on the unfolding fate of American ideals and American innocence. He delivered the address at the annual meeting of the Associated Harvard Alumni on June 12, 1914. It appears in print here for the rst time.

MESSRS. Presidents, members of the illustrious class of 1949, honored guests, fellow students, ladies and gentlemen: I must confess to having accepted your invitation with certain apprehensions. Not only was I aware that words uttered here in the past have launched lofty visionary programs that helped to reshape the world, but I also recalled having read that some one hundred and thirty-six years ago, another writer, whose rst and middle names I happen to share, gave a talk here at Harvard that was so rankling and ill-received that it got him banished from this campus for close to thirty years! Indeed, before he was allowed to return, the Civil War had been fought and terminated by an uneasy peace, Abraham Lincoln had been assassinated, and American society had been so utterly transformed that my paternal grandfather, a recently freed slave, had become actively involved in South Carolina

politics.*

Therefore, my rst impulse was to thank you for considering me worthy of such an honor and then to excuse myself in the name of that discretion which is prudence. But then I began to view your request as a call to adventure and experience. I was nudged even closer to acceptance by a question of personal consistency. “How,” I asked myself, “could you who have protested against policies of social exclusion and denials of opportunity now refuse one of the rarest opportunities of all?” To this I had no easy answer; for as I see it, protest is not an end in itself, but an e ort in the direction of responsible and creative participation. And although I was still a bit uneasy and perhaps overly mindful of the glamour of the occasion and the mystique with which words spoken here have inspirited this platform, I reassured myself that such uneasiness was only normal, and that like any young black freshman entering an Ivy League college for the rst time, I was reacting to the presence of a mystery. Please! Not of race, but of social hierarchy, that mystery which arises from strangeness and from the di

erences in experience between individuals and groups occupying di erent regions, neighborhoods, and levels of the social pyramid. Such mysteries arise out of the di culty of communicating across the

hierarchical divisions of American society, and a great deal of our misunderstanding springs from our failures of communication. Such mystery is a product of psychological distance and our ignorance of one another, and it is so persistent that even our great improvements in communications technology make it easier for Americans to misunderstand one another.

Should a writer be balked by such a mystery? Surely not if he has the curiosity characteristic of novelists, and certainly not when he realizes that he has not only been asked to communicate, but also to break bread and take part in nothing less than a Cantabrigian pageant rite of spring! Therefore, like any young initiate, I could do nothing less than confront whatever mystery might lurk within this symbolic occasion, take my chances, and hope that at the least I wouldn't be banished. Then something happened that almost changed my mind: I received a letter from Harvard addressed to Ralph Waldo Emerson!

Lord, but what tenacious memories you Harvards have!

And now that I stand before you, how fortunate for me that my unmistakable pigmentation shines forth no less as sign than as symbol. I assure you that even though I've insisted for years that our American obsession with practical joking was originally not intentional, but arose out of the incongruities abounding in a man-and-mammy-made society set up within an unexplored and alien land, it was still somewhat shocking to nd, under the most decorous of circumstances, the image of a Negro American novelist made to show forth through the ghostly (and I hope benign) lineaments of a white philosopher and poet.

But then, this was not the rst time that my contact with Harvard was productive of shock. During the summer of 1953, a few short years after you gentlemen set forth upon the journey which you celebrate here today, I found myself in Memorial Hall taking part in a conference on the contemporary novel. There had been an impassioned exchange of ideas, and

after the session ended I was approached by a lady who complimented me on some of the remarks I had made—and then without pause or transition informed

me that she was in communication with intelligent beings on the planet Mars.

Now at the time man hadn't even set foot on the moon, so I needn't tell you how surprised I was. But this was obviously a genteel and learned lady, and she spoke quietly but with an impressive ring of conviction. So much so that I stood fascinated, hearing her out, and only when she had excused herself to exchange ideas with others of the participants did I stumble out into the hall with my head awhirl as I tried to tie what I'd been saying about the relationship between the novel and American experience together with what *she* had said about communicating with Marsmen.

And it was then that it happened.

As I stumbled along, my attention was drawn upward and I was aware of the marble walls, somber and carved with names. Then came a moment in which perception leaped dizzily ahead of the processes of normal thought. Up to that time no history book that I had read had told me anything of what I stood before, but I knew its signi cance almost without knowing, and the shock of recognition lled me with a kind of anguish. Something within me cried out

"No!" against that painful knowledge, for I knew that I stood within the presence of Harvard men who had given their young lives to set me free. But no, not for me personally, because I didn't exist, nor perhaps for any slave they'd ever seen. They had sacri ced their lives, had paid what Abraham Lincoln termed "the last full measure of devotion," for an ideal of freedom. And what lled me with anguish was that I had been ignorant of their sacri ce, had been unaware of my indebtedness. Standing there I was ashamed of my ignorance and of the circumstance that had assigned these young men to the shadows of our historical knowledge. Upon them a discontinuity had been imposed by the living, and their heroic gestures had been repressed along with the details of the shameful abandonment of those goals for which they had given up their lives.

Without question, the consequences of that imposed discontinuity, that betrayal of ideal and memory, are still with us today.

That shock of recognition, that epiphany, occurred back in 1953.

A few weeks ago I had occasion to observe to the graduating class of

a great state university that they were among the rst American generations to have grown up under the full impact of the malignant forces generated by the suppression of such heroic details, no less than by the more shameful details of our national conduct. The result of this, I suggested, was to deny them an easy access to that convenient posture of “American innocence” that had been the concern of American writers from Emerson to Faulkner, and which engaged much of the artistic energy of Henry James.

Here “innocence” refers to our tendency to ignore the evil which can spring from our good intentions, as well as to the consternation with which Americans react upon discovering the negative, often appalling, results that can erupt from actions conceived as totally positive. In the terminology of tragic drama such “innocence” is viewed as an aspect of human character, and when operative in the psychology of the Hero it is termed a *tragic aw*. The Greeks termed this aw in character and perception *hubris*, and to the force which springs up from the enactment of such tragic aws, and which clings to tragic action like the clicks of erasure to magnetic recording tape, the Greeks gave the name of *nemesis*.

I nd it interesting that such American failures of perception were termed “innocence,” because *hubris* is usually accompanied by some form of arrogance and insolence, by some form of overbearing pride. Perhaps this is because in the drama of American society one of the most damaging forms of insolence and pride is racism. Now lest I appear about to take o on a tirade of indictment—of which we’ve had quite enough—let me hasten to add that neither tragic arrogance nor insolence is limited to Americans; these aws arise from the nature of the human animal and from the limitations encountered by human consciousness when asserting itself against the vast multiplicity of the universe.

As for *nemesis*, well, here I think it best to reject the de nitions of literary critics as perhaps too moralistic in favor of that o ered by a mathematician and philosopher who once taught here at Harvard—

namely, Scott Buchanan. Buchanan de nes *nemesis* as "the eventual consequence of that blindness and arrogance produced by *hubris*, and as the vengeance that the ignored factor in a situation takes on

man and his virtues." Note that he speaks of man's pride as an aspect of his virtues, for I'd not have you miss the fact that *I* see Americans as motivated, even in their failures, by the virtues embodied in the American creed. I'd even go so far as to give the pride of racism its due by reminding you that when Faust asked Mephistopheles what he was, the reply was, "A part of that force which always seeks evil and always does good."

It is a tough answer to accept, but it suggests that we look carefully into our own motives. At any rate, pride of race is not an evil in itself—even black men possess such pride. The evil lies in the brutalities committed in its name. The same goes for our pride in production, in the size of our gross national product, in sheer bigness, in our inventiveness, in our ability to create and ful ll needs both false and real, and in our ingenuity in exploiting the natural resources of this great land. Yes, but in all of these areas we have recently begun to su er startling reversals. Our most seriously considered enterprises have taken on the character of maliciously motivated practical jokes. Even our ability to govern ourselves appears to have gotten out of hand. So if I speak here at length of *nemesis*, it is because I suspect that whatever else the times in which we live turn out to be, they are *our* days of *nemesis*.

Hence my suggestion to those students that the society which they were about to enter as adults would be quite unlike the society of their parents. Nor could they ignore its tragic realities by adopting a posture of innocence. Since 1954, say, events both negative and positive have rendered such innocence impossible. American society and the world alike have changed more drastically than at any time during our relatively short history, and this generation of students has observed and been a part of that change. Fundamental to that change has been the broadening of our dispensing of justice, an action that has solved many crucial problems and created still

others. But with the legal supports of racism giving way, there has come a broadening of access to our institutions. The individuality and talent, the potential, of those once assigned to the anonymity of the racial stereotype are now being recognized, and a wavering struggle toward an equalizing of opportunity is under way. Further,

the patterns of political alliances have been changing, bringing new chaos and indecision as well as a recti cation of past inequities.

Regional antagonisms have receded, along with the smug hypocrisies used to justify them. In brief, chaos has come with order, and some good things have been exchanged for other good things, some bad things for other bad things, and some, thank God, for good.

Yes, but before such experience, such knowledge, what innocence? This generation of students has, like ourselves, observed vast changes in the direction of the American social drama and felt the shock and trauma of acts that have deprived us of a president, a senator, and a great spiritual leader. We have witnessed startling reversals of attitudes and alliances in the eld of politics. Following the lead of a native Texan whom many despised for his liberalism, Southern politicians at rst grudgingly and then with that bewildering mixture of motives and shift of position characteristic of politicians, show a growing willingness to obey the law and share the common power with their black fellow Southerners. One could almost believe that racial discrimination and disenfranchisement were nothing more than a tactic, a symbolic gesture. One could, that is, if he could forget either the recent past or the names engraved on the wall of Memorial Hall.

But accompanying these reversals in attitudes and customs is yet another, wherein Northern whites have reacted to the pressures of black Northerners for more equality as vehemently and in some cases as violently and irrationally as their Southern counterparts.

And this resistance is accompanied by reams of pseudoscienti c justi cation, double-talk, and diversionary tactics. So the tensions and contentions continue, but for the rst time in our history the social drama that is American society is beginning to proceed according to the original script—by which I mean the Constitution and Bill of Rights. Virtue and *nemesis*

exert their tensions, yes. But for the rst time we appear to be facing up to the reality of the Americanness of American diversity, and to the past which made us what we are. For the rst time we are facing up to the tragic cost

paid by some for the achievements of our form of government without recognition or recompense.

T. S. Eliot's reminder that *What we have inherited from the fortunate*

/ We have taken from the defeated must not be forgotten, for such forgetfulness leaves us vulnerable to *nemesis*. Because today *nemesis* exerts its force in forms and places we least expect: in areas of society thought safe from chaos; in the form of criminal acts, including murder, proclaimed as being committed in the name of human freedom; in the corruption of art and the perversion of fashion; in drug cults and Satan worship; in superstition and false science; and in the distortion of the communicative function of language. None of this is new, I know, only its extent and the malignity which it embodies. And what is the antidote? Here I can only fall back upon the teaching of that earlier Ralph Waldo and suggest, conscience and consciousness, more consciousness and more conscientiousness! This achieved, and it will take time, perhaps we can then say truly of the 1960s what Henry James had to say mistakenly of the late 1860s, that they mark "an era in the history of the American mind [in which there was] introduced into the national consciousness a certain sense of proportion and relation, of the world being a more complicated place than it had hitherto seemed, the future more treacherous, success more di cult.

At the rate at which things are going, it is obvious that good Americans will be more numerous than ever; but the good American, in days to come, will be a more critical person than his complacent and con dent grandfather. He will have eaten of the tree of knowledge. He will not, I think, be a skeptic, and still less, of course, a cynic; but he will be, without discredit to his well-known capacity for action, an observer. He will remember that the ways of the Lord are inscrutable, and that this is a world in which everything happens; and eventualities, as the late Emperor of the French used to say, 'will not nd him intellectually unprepared.' "

What a glorious exhortation! For exhortation it was, yes, but when taken at short range, what a awed act of prophecy! But then, if I may say so, James's imagination was always ahead of his times.

Besides, his experience, class identity, and re nement of taste

placed him at a distance which made knowledge of the recalcitrant complexity of much of the humanity for which he had such bright hopes di cult to come by. What is more, he had no idea of the great potential for chaos and order that was embodied in those who had been liberated by the forces that made for and decided the outcome of the Civil War—if indeed the outcome of that war has yet been decided. Quite frankly, it is my opinion that it is still in the balance, and only our enchantment by the spell of the possible, our endless optimism, has led us to assume that it ever really ended.

Instead, it would seem that while the military phase of that war ended in 1865, there actually occurred a reversal of Clausewitz's famous formula through which the Civil War, upper case, continued on as *civil* war, lower case, in which that war of arms was replaced by a war of politics, racial and ethnic violence, ritual sacri ce based on race and color, and by economic and judicial repression.

American awareness of this metamorphosis of that ongoing con ict was obscured for all but its victims by the burgeoning growth of our industrial capacity and technological potential—all made possible by the defeat of a rival, slavery-based economic system. Yes, and by the assertion of that American innocence of which I spoke earlier. Yes, I know, viewed in this light that

"innocence" took the basic form of a aunting disregard for the principles upon which this nation was founded.

So I think by now my meaning is clear: All of the signs, both positive and negative, seem to indicate that the nation has been pushed toward an awareness of the tragic nature of the American experience; the dark underside of our history has taken on the form of a many-headed *nemesis*. But if all this seems too pessimistic, remember that the antidote to *hubris,* to

overweening pride, is irony, that capacity to discover and systemize clear ideas. Or, as Emerson insisted, the development of consciousness, consciousness, *consciousness*. And with consciousness, a more re ned conscientiousness, and most of all, that tolerance which takes the form of humor, for when Americans can no longer laugh at each other, they have to ght one another.

Gentlemen of the Class of 1949, you have been termed fortune's darlings by no less an authority than *Fortune* magazine. This alone suggests that the many forms of *nemesis* that threaten the nation haven't completely overwhelmed us. We admire your achievements and are well aware that many of the recti cations of past failures are the results of your willingness to deal with change. If I have sounded pessimistic, your involvement with the complexities of American society allows you to know where to say amen and where to say nay. All American society since 1954 has undergone a profound change. Let us not be dismayed, let us not lose faith, simply because the correctives which we have set in motion, and you have set in motion, took a long time. It took strong stomachs, it took strong arms, it took our capacity for violence and for humor to get us to this point. I say this to you, as one who believes that the di culties which we face today are indeed minor. What seems to be called for is an honest confrontation with our mistakes, as any scientist or scholar would say, and a willingness to confront the chaos, the *nemesis*, which is about us. After all, *nemesis* is only another word for peril.

*In July 1838 Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered his "Divinity School Address" at the

Harvard Divinity School. The ensuing outcry among the faculty and Boston clergy over

"in delity," "pantheism," and "atheism" led to a ban on speaking engagements for Emerson at Harvard which lasted nearly thirty years.

HAVERFORD STATEMENT

Ellison made this statement using his "situation as a Negro American" to explain his

“personal a rmation of integration without the surrender of our unique identity as a people” and his belief that “the only way to be an e ective Negro intellectual is by being a most perceptive and responsible American intellectual.” His comment followed discussions in Haverford, Pennsylvania, May 30-31, 1969. It appears in print here for the rst time.

IN spite of all the writing I do, and for all of the lectures I give each year, there are many matters which I won’t write about, nor, except with my wife and a few intimate friends, do I discuss them. Perhaps this is because they have to do with ideas, emotions, and attitudes which grow out of my situation as a Negro American, and with those unde ned and uncodi ed aspects of our lives which require the sympathy and insight usually found only among those who have been conditioned and disciplined by our speci c group experience.

Today such ingroup discussion is no mere luxury; it is a necessity both for ourselves, for our restless youth, and for the American intellectual community as a whole. There is no question but that my own participation in our discussions at Haverford had something of the e ect of a catharsis. I was cleansed of some of my doubts and confusions, and thankfully I was stimulated not by the sound of my own all-too-familiar voice, but by your ideas and by your passion. If this is to any extent true of the other participants, I believe our enterprise was well worth the e ort and should be continued on a permanent basis. Certainly it points to the necessity of our no longer working in isolation from one another, and it is clear that we have much to o er that has been missing from discussions in the larger American intellectual community. There is simply no avoiding the fact that there are many aspects of American life which can only be described, analyzed, and de ned by black intellectuals, for no other group possesses an adequate perspective or so urgent a need.

In summing up what I tried to say in our discussions, I would emphasize my personal a rmation of integration without the surrender of our unique identity as a people to be a viable and, indeed, inescapable goal for black Americans. As a writer who tries to reduce the ux and ow of life to meaningful artistic forms, I am stuck with integration, because the very process of the imagination as it goes about bringing together a multiplicity

of scenes, images, characters, and emotions and reducing them to signi cance is nothing if not integrative. Further, the object of my ctional imagination is American society and the American experience as experienced fundamentally by Negroes, and I nd it impossible to

deal with either in isolation, for they are intricately united in their diversity. The judgments implied by the ctional products of my imagination might well repudiate many accepted American values and de nitions of reality, but this by no means infers that the integrative role of the imagination—and of the intellect—is invalid.

It does imply that the larger American ideals of freedom are the ultimate ground upon which any literary evaluations of the cost, pain, joy, and triumph of being human are tested.

The American people are united in all their regional, class, ethnic, and religious diversity by a bond of language. There are many idioms of that language, and it is partially the creation of a voice which found its origin in Africa. Indeed, the language began to be in uenced by this voice long before the American nation was formed. In the beginning was the word, and our voice sounded in the language with which the word was spoken. The American language owes something of its directness, exibility, music, imagery, mythology, and folklore to the Negro presence. It is not, therefore, a product of “white” culture as against “black” culture; rather it is the product of cultural integration. And the realities of discrimination and racism notwithstanding, it is a fact that *culturally* the melting pot has indeed melted, and that one of the strongest forces shaping the general American culture has been what I call the Negro American idiom.

I am calling attention to the cultural pluralism of American life because until the present college generation this pluralism as expressed in art, folkways, and style was an important source of Negro American optimism —just as that optimism was a support of the general faith in the workability of the American system. Our elders recognized their presence and in uence in areas of American life from which they were physically barred, and while the American house was of many mansions, they knew that despite racial discrimination there was something of themselves dwelling in most of them, and not merely as servants. Sometimes they made hue and cry over

the theft of their substance and their style, and sometimes they were silent, but they saw themselves in all the movements of American life no matter how confused the scene. For

them the problem was not that of identifying with the scene, but of having others give public recognition to their contributions.

Certainly there was no question of trying to withdraw in a pique or of surrendering their investment in the experiment.

Today that sense of having shared creatively in the common American experiment is under assault by passionate young blacks who have lost their mooring in tradition. They are romantic, earnest, and ignorant, a state for which I believe that we as intellectuals are responsible because in pursuing our specialties we have failed to interpret the past and de ne the present and project the future in ways that are available to the young. Far too frequently black youth have been forced to depend upon intellectuals of other groups for interpretations of their relationship to the larger society. In fact other groups of intellectuals have given more time to the task than we ourselves. Often they appear so obsessively concerned with de ning our lifestyles, character, traditions, and values as to reduce us to silence and pliable inaction.

Frequently they seem motivated by a desire to manipulate our image for political and economic purposes of their own, and some have taken the concepts of Negro sociologists and turned them against us, creating thereby much confusion and great resentment.

But whatever their motives, the fact is that they are functioning as intellectuals, and it is their legitimate task, as it is ours, to explore the wholeness of American life and the interrelationships between the various groups which compose it.

That they have co-opted our role is a criticism of ourselves, for we have failed to address ourselves e ectively to many of the broader problems of American life, and we have failed to follow up our often creative analysis of speci cally Negro American problems into the broader areas where they inevitably lead. In other words, we often forget that the only way to be an e

ective Negro intellectual is by being a most perceptive and responsible *American* intellectual. I believe that the state of black youth points to our failure, and if we have failed them, then we have failed American youth generally.

For all their talk of black separatism—really another version of secessionism, an old American illusion which arises whenever

groups reach an explosive point of frustration—and for all their stance of alienation, they are really acting out a state of despair.

They are frightened by the existence of opportunities for competing with their white peers on a basis of equality which did not exist for us. They su er traumatically from the shock of sudden opportunity.

The shackles have been struck from at least one of their ankles, and their skin is sensitive to the turbulent air and the illusory possibility of unrestrained movement. Actually they are in the position of pioneers who must enter an unknown territory armed only with the knowledge and skills which they have brought with them from the past, but instead of plunging in and testing themselves against the unknown, they choose rather to argue with the de ciencies of the past and to direct accusations against their parents. They accuse us of lacking manhood and courage, and they have declared themselves a new breed—which perhaps they are. One thing is certain: they have thrown us a challenge, and I believe that we should meet them head on. I don't think that we should be put in a position of apologizing for our backgrounds, values, or goals, but I do think we must provide a forum wherein the unwritten wisdom of the group can be intellectualized and passed on to those who are sincerely seeking for answers and orientation.

HOMAGE TO WILLIAM L. DAWSON

Although Ellison left Tuskegee in 1936 after his junior year, what he learned and experienced there resonated in his mind and work for the rest of his life. Ellison gave this talk honoring the conductor, composer, and teacher William L, Dawson, whom he considered to be "the greatest

classical musician in that section of the country," to the Philadelphia Tuskegee Club in 1911. It appears in print here for the rst time.

FELLOW Tuskegeeans: I hope it isn't lost on you that something natural is happening which is at the same time a little unexpected if we consider the reputation of Tuskegee. Here a very great composer, a master of choral music, is being honored by a fellow who studied under him, who went to Tuskegee because there was a man named Dawson there, who—since this seems to be a part of the tradition, and it actually happens—rode freight trains (it was too far to walk) to get to a place where there was musical excellence and a tradition of musical creativity. Most people didn't think about it in these terms, and yet it was there. It was there, I suspect, before Mr.

Dawson graduated and returned to work his wonders on the scene.

But it was also there as a deep tradition, one which bathed each and every thing that was done at Tuskegee with the overtones and undertones of a sense of life which perhaps could not have been expressed except through art. It was there perhaps out of the sheer desperate need to assert our hopes and dreams against the complications of living in the South—or for that matter of living in America. For we were up against de nitions of our humanity which we could not accept, and we were too busy trying to go where *we* wanted to go, and to become what *we* wanted to become, to stop and spend much time arguing about it. It was an assertion of our own sense of life, the insistent drive to de ne human hope in the United States, not through avoiding those aspects of reality, and especially of our condition, which were brutal and dehumanizing, but taking that too as part of the given scene, and then determining to go beyond it. Not to ignore it, not to pretend that it didn't exist, but to humanize it, to take it in, to make it connect with other aspects of living—with the dream, with the sounds of the future and the sounds of hope. We did this through music. It was the tradition far back in the slave past which enhances the activities of Tuskegee.

Underneath the desire for education or the possession of more technology, underneath the drive for intellectual competency is that other thing which can only be expressed through art.

As I said, it is rather odd that a fellow who didn't make it as a musician should be here trying to say something about William L.

Dawson. But I think just as he reached out through his choir, through his ability to make people who were not really musicians give voice to sublime music, he was doing something else: acting as a cultural hero, acting as a living symbol of what was possible. So we came to Tuskegee, so we played in the band and in the orchestra, so we studied. (He once threw a piece of crayon at me!) You learned that even here life was real, life was honest, life was ambiguous. But you got certain messages which you weren't quite aware that you were getting.

When Mr. Dawson stood before a choir or the band or the orchestra, you had the sense that you were dealing with realities beyond yourself—that you were being asked to give yourself to meanings which were unde nable except in terms of music and musical style. But you also had the sense that with his elegance and severity, with his grasp of the meaning of verse, the value that he could draw out of a word and make you *draw* out of it, the way he could make you phrase, could teach you to grasp the meaning of a line of verse which sometimes he had set to music—sometimes Handel—all this gave you a sense that through this activity and dedication to the arts, you were going beyond and were getting insight into your other activities.

As I have said, Tuskegee has been a place of music, and it is ironic that through all of the years of its identity as a place of agriculture and industry, it has had this other dimension, that dimension of art which went beyond the simple matter of our singing and playing instruments. During the thirties Tuskegee was one of the major musical centers of the South. It was to Tuskegee that the M

etropolitan Opera groups came; it was to Tuskegee that the great string quartets and the Philharmonic came. It was not to the University of Alabama; it was not to white schools in this area, but to Tuskegee. It was here that the tradition was. I will tell you something else: it wasn't a new thing when the Tuskegee choir opened Radio City during the thirties. It was only the event through which the broader America, the broader United States became

aware of what had been going on there for many, many years. We live in ourselves; we grow from what went before. What comes after us depends on what we do in preserving that which we share, and which has been handed over into our keeping.

I think it important during the ftieth anniversary of the Philadelphia Tuskegee Club that you honor Mr. Dawson and impress upon the nation at large that something very crucial to the cultural life of the United States—and perhaps to the political life of the United States—will be lost if we allow the tradition of Tuskegee to go down. I'm not talking now about politics. I'm talking about living examples; I'm talking about musical traditions. Because what is frequently overlooked—usually overlooked—in these days when we talk of discovering our identities, is that there was an identity here all along. And when you see a choir like this—two choirs: one improvised, I understand, and one which has been together—when you hear the articulation, when you hear the blending of the voices that grew out of an *identity*, you are aware of an identity based upon struggle with basic realities. A tradition which has been extended, broadened, and enriched by William L. Dawson, a tradition which is made up of music which our forefathers heard and created out of what was around them and what they brought with them from Africa. But the magical thing about it is that it is not simply an ingroup music. This tradition is an artistic de nition of what the American experience *is* when faced with grace and a willingness to give oneself to the tragic dimensions of the American experience. It is very precious, and the entire nation depends upon it because there is not enough of it.

We are very lucky that an artist of Mr. Dawson's stature found his way to Tuskegee at the age of thirteen. (He must have been a little criminal, because he ran away from home.) But he spent many years there, and received the basis of his musical training at Tuskegee.

Some years ago, in speaking with a group of my white colleagues along with another Tuskegeean, we were talking about the writings of Joyce and Eliot and Pound, and all of a sudden Albert Murray said, "Well, Ralph, aren't you glad that we discovered these people

at Tuskegee for ourselves?" And yes, I was glad, because now I can never read the poetry of those poets without associating it with Tuskegee; without seeing the magenta skies at dusk and sunup; without seeing the clock in White Hall. I must say that I was the fellow who used to wake Dr. Bryce up when I was there, because I was a trumpeter. I used to stand out there early in the morning and blow rst call, and most of the time I put you to bed too.

Through tradition, the place, the association, the sense of discovering that which is ever new in the old and the continuing, the abiding—in this way the artist ful lls his role. If you can't spell it out—and some of these things cannot be spelled out in words—

they can be felt, can be grasped, can enter you, can animate your body and thus animate your mind. This is a great gift. We are very fortunte that such a man as Mr. Dawson has touched so many of our lives. Through his dedication to art he has made it possible for me, for instance, to be as dedicated and disciplined about literature. I'm sure that the same is true for most of you who have been taught by him and touched by him. This is a secret of education which goes beyond grades, which goes beyond even brilliance of mind. This is a secret of the place, the people, the times, and that deep art of music which is far more important to us than such poor critics as I have been able to spell out.

If there were a choir here, I would say let us sing "Let Us Break Bread Together." I am not particularly religious, but I am claimed by music, and I was claimed by William L. Dawson.

ALAIN LOCKE

On December 1, 1973, Ellison participated with Albert Murray, Nathan Huggins, and Harold Cruse in the Alain L. Locke Symposium at Harvard University. Ellison's autobiographical tribute to Locke's "conscious approach to American *culture" was published in the* Harvard Advocate, *Spring 1914.*

I'll start by recalling my brief acquaintance with Alain Locke. He came to the Tuskegee campus in 1935 to visit Hazel Harrison. Most of you won't know that name, but Hazel Harrison was a pianist of such a quality that had

she come along in this generation, you would be as familiar with her name as you are with those of Shirley Verrett or Leontyne Price. Hazel Harrison was an artist, a teacher, a great person—one of those people at Tuskegee who sponsored and encouraged all sorts of artistic and intellectual activities both within her classroom and outside it. Dr. Locke came down to visit his friend Hazel Harrison, and she, in her generosity and sense of dedication, saw to it that a whole group of us were able to meet him.

I met Dr. Locke again not much later when I went to Harlem. The morning after I arrived, as I was walking on 125th Street I met two people who were heroic gures for me at the time, Alain Locke and Langston Hughes. It was a brief meeting, no more than Locke introducing me to Hughes, and some small talk. I was to see Locke only once or twice again over the next twenty years, but, as with Albert Murray, I knew of his work, I had read his book thanks to a teacher in the city school of Oklahoma City, and I was to reread it many times.

I mention this because I was reading everything I could get my hands on which tried to make sense out of the mysteries of art and music. You see, I thought I was a musician in those days, and spent most of my time with books and music. What Locke did for me, as he did for Al Murray, was to act as a guide. He stood for a conscious approach to *American* culture—and I stress American culture because I think we are in a great deal of confusion over our role in the creation of American culture. It is so easy to become unconsciously racist by simply stressing one part of our heritage, thus reducing the complexity of our cultural heritage to a genetic reality which is only partially dealt with.

Al Murray has said that all blacks are part white, and all whites part black. If we can deal with that dilemma—and it is a dilemma—

then we can begin to deal with the problem of de ning the American experience as we create it. You cannot have an American

experience without having a black experience. Nor can you have the technology of jazz, as original as many of those techniques are, without having had long centuries of European musical technology, not to mention the technologies of various African musical traditions. Locke thought about

these matters. I didn't always agree with him, and I don't today, but he did point a direction, he did act as a role model, he did move in the direction of some sort of conscious assessment of the pluralistic condition of the United States. I think it was sometime in the 1830s that Lowelessa Hoy and Walt Whitman suggested that there would be an American grand opera and that the language of that opera would be found in Afro-American speech, "the speech of the slaves," as Whitman put it.

Locke felt very much the same way. Thus it seems amazing to me that we have moved away from that complex, mysterious, perplexing sense of our role in this country to something which is much too simplistic.

I can remember having rst heard the name Richard B. Harrison, when he was performing in something called *Green Pastures*. I don't know whether *Green Pastures* has been done in recent years so that the younger students in the audience would be aware of it. But it was a play, done after a piece of ction written by a white Southerner called *Old Man Adam's Children*. This slightly burlesque work was stereotyped, but Mr. Harrison, in acting out the role of the Lord, somehow transformed the original tenor of the play and made it something transcendent. Perhaps it is time for it to be revived. But what nally struck me about Richard B. Harrison was what I discovered after I went back home and began to reminisce about the early days in Oklahoma City. I was born in the rooming house where he used to stop. I asked what he was doing there, and was told he was giving Shakespeare readings all over the place, giving one-man recitals, reading the soliloquies and so on, evidently with a great deal of e ect. This was years after he had gone on and become known as an actor.

What I am suggesting is that when you go back you do not nd a pure stream; after all, Louis Armstrong, growing up in New Orleans, was taught to play a rather strict type of military music before he

found his jazz and blues voice. Talk about cultural pluralism! It's the air we breathe; it's the ground we stand on. It's what we have to come to grips with as we discover who we are and what we want to add to the ongoing de nition of the American experience. I think in his e ort to de ne what was di erent about that group of Negroes of the 1920s, Locke was trying to resolve those questions, and to bring to bear all that he knew about the complexities

of culture. It is very di cult in this country to nd a pure situation. Usually when you nd some assertion of purity, you are dealing with historical, if not cultural ignorance.

Al Murray mentioned Mr. Brown and the imperatives which were to be found in his particular school. I can remember another gure whom I held in as much esteem as Alain Locke when as I was growing up, and this was a man by the name of Melvin Tolson.

Many of you might know his poetry, but I rst knew Tolson as a teacher at Wiley College in Texas. Tolson was training a drama group, but his special pride and joy was a debating society through which he had inherited all the techniques of debate and rhetoric from the nineteenth century as they had been ltered down through those young New Englanders who went South during the Reconstruction to teach the freedmen. Tolson extended these traditions and techniques to such an extent that more than once the debating team of Oxford used to come out there and get clobbered.

Now, this isn't the kind of knowledge of American education or American cultural history that you nd easily available, but I assure you I am not creating fantasies. I am speaking of what actually happened. How confusing it was to nd that what was considered so excellent that it could defeat the members of a great university was not honored throughout the larger society.

Well, be that as it may, what we had to do—and there were a few along with me—was to decide where the action was. This was one way of dealing with that imposed sense of alienation: by taking what you had, learning to look at it through what was available, looking at and listening to those people who spoke in that pluralistic idiom—men like Bingham Page, the great Count Basie (who was conservatory trained!)—people who in their own way de ned what

the American experience was, who de ned that which was a rmative beyond all contradictions of social hierarchy and racism.

Those people and many others projected in artistic, rhetorical, and other forms the essence of the American experience as members of a minority

group, and as individuals who responded, as best they could, to what was there to be expressed. They a rmed and de ned not only the black experience, but what was basically an American experience, and, when it was most transcended, the experience of human beings living in a world of turbulent transition. This, it seems to me, was something Alain Locke sensed. It led him to deal with Afro-American folklore and music from a background that included his studies with James and Royce. This is all one can really ask of any individual: that he not deny where he comes from, and that he plumb this background with all of the conscious thought that he possibly can. To do less than this is to be a second-rate human being. That we cannot a ord.

Locke did something else in projecting his idea of cultural pluralism; he moved, it seems to me, toward that sense of freedom which lies with the complex "unfreedom" we as a people experience in the United States. The slaves rst sensed it when they looked at the people in the big house dancing their American versions of European social dances. First the slaves mocked them, and then decided, coming from dancing cultures, that they could do them better—so they went on to de ne what is surely the beginnings of an American choreography. Most of the time these dances were done in rags, which to the people in the big house looking out at the activity in the yard appeared hilariously comic. Well, the new frequently does appear so, the new frequently appears strange—it has to. But when Americans, all Americans, began to dance on the popular stage or whatever, one place they could look and be sure that they were Americans was back there in those slave yards, and later the Negro dance halls and juke joints where that original American choreography had found its direction. I don't like racial bragging, so I'm not talking about our African genes so much as what our people have made of the chaos of America as they tried to nd new forms of expression. They had the freedom to do so

because, being at the bottom of the social hierarchy, there was no one to take them too seriously. They had the freedom of experimentation, of trying out things no matter how ridiculous they might seem, and in doing so they found ways of making the human body "move," as Flip Wilson might say, in stylized ways which were di erent. Inevitably these forms came together; there is always integration of artistic styles whether it is done out of

admiration, out of need, or out of a motive of economic exploitation. It nds its way to the larger American public, and as such, everyone who is touched by it becomes a little bit Afro-American. Sometimes they become Afro-American Episcopal Zion; sometimes they become Black Baptist (as most rock singers are now); sometimes they become a little bit Southern in their talk and a little colored in their walk.

Speaking of language, whenever anyone tells you that you're outside the framework of American culture, and when they de ect you into something called "black English," remember that the American version of the English language was born in rebellion against proper English usage, and that the music of the African voice and the imagery coming from the people who lived close to the soil and under the conditions of slavery added greatly to that language. And when you look for the spiritual context of that language, you can be sure that some of the passion for the unful lled ideals of democracy comes from the voices of those black and unknown bards, as well as from my mama and papa and your mama and papa crying in church, protesting in pool halls, cussing in shine parlors, and celebrating Juneteenth (that's what we call emancipation). The language of the United States is partly black people's creation; Locke understood that. There is no imagery of the great nineteenth-century writers which ignores our existence as metaphor of the human condition. There is no speci cally American vernacular and language which has not been touched by us and our style. Locke sensed this.

Some of us have tried—not as disciples; certainly I'm no disciple of Locke—to think consciously of what it meant to be an American and a Negro. The true meaning, perhaps, will be found by those who come after us, because this is a changing situation; about the only thing which is unchanged about it is the confusion. We still do not know who we are. I had hoped that by the 1960s people like you would be telling me who I am, and maybe you tell me sometimes, but what I have found is that during the decade these strains of continuity, these linkages between people on the basis of ideas and experience were automatically, arbitrarily thrown overboard. That is disastrous for writers; it is disastrous for any sort of human enterprise because we live one upon the other; we follow, we climb upon the shoulders of those who have gone before.

When Locke was at Tuskegee, he had much to say about what was happening among the artists and intellectuals in Paris. In the studio where I met Dr. Locke, Hazel Harrison, who had been one of Busoni's prize pupils, had manuscripts of Proko ev which I had the privilege of listening to her play as she rehearsed her repertoire. It struck me later that here I was at what some would have called a

"cow college," and I was in touch with the living work of Proko ev.

This was no accident. Miss Harrison had dedicated herself to music.

She had lived in Busoni's home in Berlin. She knew Petrie and Proko ev. She knew many of the great musicians of the time, and it was not incongruous that she could be a black woman whose possibilities of being recognized as a great star were strictly limited, while at the same time she was ful lling her obligation as a teacher and musician.

That she did so was very important to me. That Dr. Locke saw the importance of trying to de ne us in that sophisticated moment, in that moment of great transition, in that moment wherein jazz was being felt (if not understood as being more than a primitive folk music), in that moment when we were far enough away from the traumas of Reconstruction to begin to think of leadership on a very broad scale, in that moment when we realized whatever the new leadership, there would not be another Frederick Douglass, or

Williams and Walker, or Scott Joplin. There would be a metamorphosis of their ideas and styles. There would be an incarnation of young people still unknown who would have some sense of what lay back there, some sense of the unspoken meaning, and who would try to translate into articulate forms that feeling about life, that assertion of identity which always made our particular contributions to the arts in this country immediately recognized as what America has instead of a sacred past.

We provided the past; we provided the suggestions. It didn't come from across the water; it came from the land. It came from beneath the social hierarchy. I don't make mysti cation, but I speak of that sense of individualism and group consciousness, which in con ict and travail seek to

de ne the country and the various pluralistic styles of American life—de ne it and de ne that which is new in human possibility. Back when Al Murray and I were at Tuskegee, we sometimes talked about Dr. Kittredge. I wanted to study with Dr.

Kittredge, but though I could ride a freight train to Tuskegee, I don't believe I could have gotten this far, and I had great doubts about what would have happened had I gotten here. Now it seems to me a certain faith has been ful lled, because at this moment we can stand here on this campus and discuss an important American gure who for so many years has been thought of as simply a spokesman for a minor aesthetic position mainly of interest to minority people.

Don't kid yourself: he was talking about all of us.

ROSCOE DUNJEE AND THE AMERICAN LANGUAGE

Roscoe Dunjee, editor of The Black Dispatch *in Oklahoma City, was a personal and public force in Ellison's early life—"a writer who in his emphasis upon the possibilities for justice o ered by the Constitution anticipated the antisegregation struggle by decades." During subsequent years in New York, Ellison continued to rely on the newspaper and on Dunjee's editorials. Here he discusses the impact of Dunjee's acting out of American ideals through the American language on his own writer's vocation. First delivered as a talk to the Black Perspective Conference in New York City on May 14, 1912, the revised essay appears in print here for the rst time.*

I confess my debt to a great newspaperman who in uenced me long before I realized that I would ever be anything but a musician. That man's name is Roscoe Dunjee. He was editor of *The Black Dispatch* in Oklahoma City. It is still in existence, and still an important paper. I sold it when I was fresh out of diapers. There's a pun in that, but I mean to imply only that I sold it when I could barely talk, and continued to sell it up into my teens. Of course there were other black newspapers as well as the *Dispatch—The Afro-American, The Pittsburgh Courier, The Kansas City Call*—and my early childhood and adolescence were tied up with reading and selling them. I sold them in Oklahoma City, sometimes from a bicycle, but more

often walking and peddling them. In McAlester, Oklahoma, where I spent my eleventh year, I would get up at 4:00 A.M. and a friend and I would load our wagons with the local papers—the white papers and those we called Negro papers—and deliver them. We shouted their headlines through the black community for hours until we had either lost our voices or had all the money we could make on those Sunday mornings.

Better still, I am of an age to have been present as a very young child in Tulsa, Oklahoma, just before the terrible riot of 1921. My mother hoped to bring up my brother and me in the North, so she took us to Gary, Indiana, where she had a brother. On our way North we stopped in Tulsa to see an older cousin who had a ne brick home in the prosperous Negro community of Greenwood. But shortly after we arrived in Gary, as luck would have it—and luck is always-ambiguous and ambivalent—there was a depression in steel, so it was my fate to have been brought back through Tulsa and see that Greenwood had been devastated and all but destroyed by bomb and re in that riot of 1921.

I don’t bring this up to bore you with how hard life has been for us in the United States, but to emphasize the courage of Roscoe Dunjee. Dunjee was a ghter, but he was more than that. His family was originally from Virginia, and had come to Oklahoma City out of Minnesota, where his father had been minister of a church. He got to Oklahoma in 1907, which was the beginning of statehood, and

established his paper with little or no money but with a great sense of adventure, much courage, and a strong faith in his people. He also had faith in something which is not always held in such respect today. Roscoe Dunjee understood what it has taken me many years to understand. He understood that not only were the American people a revolutionary people, but that in the shedding of blood, the sacri ce, the agony, and anguish of establishing this nation, all Americans became bound in a covenant. Roscoe Dunjee understood, at a time when hardly anybody else did, that there was an irrational element in the American Constitution, a mysterious binding force which was the secret to moving people. Perhaps you couldn’t move them too far. Perhaps you couldn’t move them to the point where they would actually live up to their commitment to the American covenant. But in his

time and his place Roscoe Dunjee was a constitutionalist, a great Negro American newspaperman who, starting from the betrayal of the Emancipation in the 1870s, somehow understood how to carve a chicken. (Those of you who have any acquaintance with Marxism realize that I am paraphrasing Lenin's comment that if you want to change history you have to know where the chicken bones are articulated.) Anyway, Roscoe Dunjee, coming out of the South by way of Minnesota to the soon-to-be new state, the Indian territory of Oklahoma, started a newspaper on hardly anything. In a very American way he focused on that awareness of what newspapers were supposed to do, and what every good newspaper in this country has focused on.

One of the major problems of American civilization has been a struggle with the English language and its proper usage. For Americans to become themselves they had to revamp their concept and use of the English language. They had to understand and, when necessary, reinterpret the overtones and undertones of a language forged in a world they had never made, with a king at the top and God above him, a language which had given birth to great poetry, philosophical writings, and drama. Here in this new land these English immigrants were involved in bloodshed, slaughter, and sacri ce in the process of seizing the land from its indigenous peoples, the Indians. These colonials imported our black forefathers,

an act which subsequently involved them in a terri c struggle to save the American reality, to come to grips with a New World reality through a fog of English terminology.

So one of the rst problems of the United States was to master the language, to convert it, to squeeze the assumptions out of it and adapt it into a exible instrumentality which would tell people what was new here. The birds, the climate, the waters, the weather, and the terrain were all di erent. There was no word in the English language to describe those long, at stretches of land which had few trees and a great abundance of grass, so we took the word *prairie* from the French. There was no precise way of expressing in the King's English the groping spirit which men were exhibiting in this country, where they were no longer held in the bounds of a class structure

supposedly handed down from God through kingship, so the term “individualism” came into being.

I suspect that in the e ort to adapt the American language, to make it tell the truth about processes and relationships between people in this country, there somehow lay the beginnings of the American Revolution. I suspect that its seeds came from the impact of the American experience upon life as we were living it. When I say “we,” I am quite conscious that we black people were already here causing all sorts of turbulence in the king’s town—in religion, music, science, and so on. Somehow in the struggle to articulate words to t with reality and reality to t with words, we had the beginnings of the American Revolution. As we fought this revolution in re and blood and sacri ce, a covenant was made, and that covenant, to use the biblical terminology, was the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Bill of Rights. These are the grounds upon which we stand today.

“In the beginning was the word.” The founders of this country understood very well that one of the problems was how to make a unity of diversity. How do you make a society in which for the rst time you have to face the fact of race? Black people were already here. We were here as slaves; everyone tells us that. We all know it, and I am sick of hearing about it. Yes, we were slaves, but we were living persons. We were chattel, but speaking chattel, chattel with a

moral sense, chattel with an artistic sense and with a great capacity for creation. So a social hierarchy was set up, open at both ends, it was said, wherein equality ruled, wherein man was no longer bound to the status of his forefathers, where the injustices of the past no longer obtained, where men and women could amplify their talents and go where they wished to go. Yet at the same time, in the name of God we black folk were put below the threshold, placed outside the bounds of humanity.

This con ict between profession and practice set up a certain turbulence within the language which a ected poets as well as reporters and other writers. The standard against which the ideal and the reality were tested was always the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence. In those documents is a great moral force, and Roscoe

Dunjee understood this when it seemed least believable and most undeserving of attention.

Somehow this little bandy-legged, hawk-nosed, brilliant, luminous man understood that the American covenant was not to be thrown away; that here, with intelligence and passion, was the secret, the play within the play which would catch the conscience of kings.

Wanting to be a composer, I grew up selling Dunjee's paper, reading it, and talking with my peers and friends about what appeared in it. And I found myself learning, questioning, being transformed, even though I didn't quite realize it, by Roscoe Dunjee's editorials in *The Black Dispatch*. Not only did they bear on the Constitution, but they were written by a man who understood that he was in the great tradition of American journalism. From the beginning he understood intuitively and consciously that the English language had to be made our own before we could unlock the secret of other Americans, before we could understand how we were di erent from Englishmen or Europeans, before we could come to grips with the new possibilities of individualism in those sermons preached by Thoreau, Emerson, and, yes, by Melville and Hawthorne. Somehow, with his courage, this man understood that the American newspaper was a force for cohesion, just as Benjamin Franklin and others understood that Americans would speak the English language in a di erent way, with a unity that was

impossible in Mother England, and that in speaking, describing, and bringing together the diversity of the experience that was occurring throughout this vast nation, we would discover ourselves and perhaps create new hope for mankind.

What Dunjee understood—and here as a newspaperman, reporter, and editorialist he was kin to the Hawthornes, Melvilles and Twains

—was that there was evil in the notion of racial superiority, and that it involved the idea of color. He understood that what undercut the bright dream of America both then and now was the unwillingness to come to grips with a problem with which we had asserted we would come to grips. I mean the promise to make a unity out of the diversity of all mankind, the

promise to surrender the past and pay the price of coming close to the unfamiliar so that we could discover ourselves and our opposite forms.

As a constitutionalist, Dunjee understood the possibility of words made sacred, so it is no surprise to me that many of the gains which have transformed this country came through e orts he led as an o cial of the NAACP in Oklahoma. The rst real inroads for desegregated education on the university level came out of Oklahoma City. Some of the rst battles won against lynching—the Jess Hollins case and others—originated in Oklahoma. These battles were fought by a newspaperman who had the courage to meet his obligations as a reporter and editorialist. In these e orts the word was made esh by a man who understood what America was about better than most of his colleagues on the other side of the color line.

He was in the great tradition of American journalism. Fortunately there were dedicated people, some of them white, who kept him going, just as a black sail-maker, a successful businessman in Philadelphia, kept William Lloyd Garrison's paper, *The Liberator*, going in the name of Abolition. Sometimes there are people who sacri ce for their ideal and for morality. In this instance you have it both ways: whites kept Frederick Douglass going and blacks kept Garrison going.

The point is that a black newspaper set out to instill democratic ideals, and to make cohesive the widely diversi ed experience of black people. Someone had to know how the brothers and sisters

were doing beyond the state and the plantation. Someone had to know what was being taught and what was being su ered. We all wanted to know. This curiosity is very American because it is from comparing notes that we de ne who we are. Whether black or white, we are all Americans. We are all subjected to that condition which came about through throwing Africans and Europeans together upon this continent, and through the unstructured nature of the societies everywhere we spread.

Being black, we sometimes forget that our experience is diversi ed. Our forefathers didn't; they understood that slavery in North Carolina was a bit di erent from slavery in Alabama or Georgia or Mississippi. They understood that slavery on rocky ground was di erent from slavery near

watercourses. They understood that slavery in the Delta was di erent from slavery in the Tidewater country. They understood because through understanding they got some conception of who they were and how diversi ed they were. In the same way the American newspaper tried to tell the American white who he was as he moved westward from the eastern seaboard and confronted the di erent geographical characteristics of the country. As he went west, he evolved di erent social processes: processes of government, newspapers, universal education, the uniformity of spelling which was imposed upon the English language for the rst time in this country. All were processes of uni cation and self-discovery.

Frederick Douglass understood this when he talked, wrote, and reported the life of "the brother," as you now say. He was helping us to come together, to identify our interests and where we were. But at the same time he was de ning the American reality, adding a fourth dimension to the American experience because you could not know who the white American was without knowing something about who the black American was. Neither lived in a vacuum.

There was a unity of place and of purpose, although the purpose led to contentions, even to murder. But a unity, a basic interest, and a uni ed mystery existed about what had been wrought in this country. Somehow this spurred black newspapers, and by Emancipation something new came into the picture. We were no

longer identi ed with the interests of our masters; we had a future which may not have been absolutely separate, but it certainly was far more mysterious.

One of the rst Negro newspapers was called *The Alienated American*. You may think that term is new; it isn't. Even then some brother in Cleveland or Cincinnati realized that we were alienated.

Another newspaper name was *The Disenfranchised American*. That is from about 1859. Others are *The Colored American, The Afro-American* and—hold on to your hats— *The Anglo-American*. Great numbers of these papers came into being at a time when they were most needed, when we were thrown more upon our own resources as freedmen. So, if anyone thinks that

a newspaper is an arbitrary enterprise, realize that our ancestors were responding to a very American situation in which we were exhorted to faith, to hope, and to militancy. We had to be reminded that the way white Americans de ned us was not what we were, and that the way we were described in the white press was not an adequate description of the breadth of our humanity.

Our need was to feel out the land, to test the people, to project the possible, and to inspirit the ideals of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Declaration of Independence into our own reality.

Thus the black newspaper started out as a voice of moral accusation documenting the failure of American ideals. From the very beginning, at its best the black press was also a recti er of news reporting from the other side. Its purpose was to tell what was underneath what was being said, to penetrate and a rm the moral ideals of the country, and to describe the failure and breakdown of a society where easy optimism and equivocation were the mode. Who could so describe if not a people who are the creators of comic style in this country, and that mixture of comedy and tragedy which we know as the blues? And describe vividly, at least for ourselves, the tragic aspects of American experience—not only describing the darker side, but making it available to anyone who had the fortitude to face up to the realities without losing our basic optimism.

Editorially and in its spirit, the American Negro press has always belonged to the entire American experience. That it has not been

read and still isn’t read by most whites today is to their disadvantage and to our detriment. This country cannot be run without adequate reporting from all levels, directions, and frontiers.

Anyone who thinks that it can, anyone who thinks that he has all the answers, is foolish because the questions change rapidly. There is no sociology of ideas in this country. You cannot tell who is thinking what or where he gets the ideas. This was vaguely understood back during the Haitian Revolution early in the nineteenth century, when Southern governors and politicians became distraught because the ideas of the French Revolution had surfaced among the slaves. This tells you something about

the availability of ideas beyond the levels of literacy. In our society, modes of conduct, styles, ideas, and even the most esoteric intellectual concepts nd their ways into strange places, and even the most unfree or illiterate American is aware of ideas and will act on them.

The Oklahoma *Black Dispatch* launched sit-ins before they occurred in North Carolina. They started with grade-school children in Oklahoma City. I don't know whether it was reported accurately, but that is what happened. The whole concept of changing segregation through appeals to the Supreme Court was present in Oklahoma City when I was a boy, and was propagated through the columns of a weekly newspaper. We never complained about the issue of black history because Dunjee was always printing black history for us to read. From the very beginnings of statehood in Oklahoma, Negroes went among the Indians as interpreters, and they were the founders of towns and cities, some of which still exist, even though most people living in them do not realize that they were founded by black men. But we knew it, we knew it.

Somehow Roscoe Dunjee understood that America moves through myth—and by myth I don't mean lies. He understood that heroic e orts and sacri ce are repeated by the nature of things. The problem is to keep up with the metamorphosis and nd out who Frederick Douglass is today, who Nat Turner is today, who Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith are today, who Sojourner Truth is. Men change, die, su er, and express themselves, but the patterns of

society demand again and again repetition of that same heroism with a new body and new face—even with a new hairstyle, perhaps.

Patterns repeat themselves as long as human circumstances endure.

We need great myths; we need to understand, translate, and interpret for ourselves the meaning of our experience. We have been too glib about this. We have come a long way. We look back and say, "That was slavery" or "He was an Uncle Tom," while in our hearts we understand that we are by the nature of our circumstances a complex people, torn in many ways. Men and women de ne themselves in action, not verbally, and here I am speaking this way, even though I must confess that I am a writer. That is when I make

my decisions, but I know that the decisions I make in reaching some description of human action come from examples of people who have not expressed themselves on a page, but who somehow understood that in variation of “Jack be nimble, Jack be quick,” you better have the cunning of Brer Rabbit in the briar patch. You better understand that we are Americans and we have our demagogues and that a man’s actions are the true test of his faith. This is the obligation of the Negro press, and I would hope you understand that its obligation is to the broader complexity.

If a jazz musician or the slaves, those unknown bards, could take all the complexity of music and re ne it, redesign it, restructure it to make it their own statement, then certainly as reporters it is our responsibility not to wait for others to initiate issues but to use our training, vision, and passion to nd paths for the entire nation.

There are no second-class standards, certainly not in music, in literature, in medicine, or in science.

We are the descendants of courageous, insightful people, people who had the tragic sense of life and who could spend themselves preciously. If we can’t look out upon this nation and foresee where problems are going to surface, no one can. And if we think that we can walk away from problems or substitute easy rhetoric for analysis, description, and eloquence, we’re kidding ourselves. I’m not talking about political solutions; I’m talking about that much maligned, misused phrase, “telling it like it is.” If you tell it like it is,

everyone has to look and listen, because you will cut right down to the bark.

What do I ask of the Negro press? Nothing. But I will be glad when I see you making use of the years of brutalization and of the insights into reality which have forced us to change the basic ground on which we stand. The black press belongs to the American nation, but rst it belongs to us.

We don’t have to have anyone else tell us about the complexity of American experience. But no one else in this country can tell it as well as we can if we ever have the will to tell it in its fullness and complexity, with all of its comic overtones and tragedy. Remember that Americans have run from

understanding the cost of this great country. We have paid much of that cost. Having paid it, we have the obligation to accuse, to prescribe, and to rectify.

I would always write as though the governor of Mississippi was looking over my shoulder.

PRESENTATION TO BERNARD MALAMUD OF THE GOLD

MEDAL FOR FICTION

Ellison was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1964, and to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1975; he was secretary of the Institute from 1977 to 1980. In 1983 he used the Academy-Institute's awarding of the Gold Medal for Fiction to Bernard Malamud to deliver these remarks on American ction and the democratic ideal, on "the mystery of how, in a nation of minorities, the last becomes rst and outstanding among equals." The address was published in the Proceedings of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters *in 1983*.

IT is unnecessary for me to acquaint you with the name of Bernard Malamud, or even to explain his having been selected to receive the Academy-Institute's Gold Medal for Fiction. You know him well as the prize-winning author of numerous short stories and novels, and as a highly respected teacher.

Indeed, Malamud's reputation ranges far beyond those who are concerned with literary values. In the popular mind he is readily identi ed as one of a quartet of novelists whose very names—

Bellow, Mailer, Malamud and Roth—convey an aura of authorial glamour. But because it ignores crucial distinctions of style, theme and vision, these authors would probably dismiss this grouping as pointless. I would agree; as an attempt to impose an easy unity upon such a prickly diversity of talent it is super cial. Yet it *does* focus upon two basic facts: Malamud shares with the others a background of the American Jewish experience, and like them he is highly successful in a di cult art.

For the uninitiated, this is enough to evoke the image of four literary musketeers shouting “All for one and one for all!” while pounding the keys of their typewriters—an amusing notion even though their implied opposition is left to one’s imagination. But when literary personalities engage the popular imagination almost anything can happen, from their being associated with gures of nineteenth-century romance to an identi cation with heroes of ancient myth and ritual. Here, I think, it is a matter of two modes of the imagination coinciding, for while interrogating social reality is a function of serious ction, adding glamour to the “American Dream”

is a function of popular mythmaking. Malamud has drawn creatively upon folklore, so now in a turnabout the popular mind would convert his career into the stu of dreams. Thus while ction feeds upon social fact, mythmaking would feed upon a fabulist.

Thus Malamud is transformed into a latter-day incarnation of Horatio Alger!

Not that Malamud has sprung exactly from rags to riches, but in enriching American literature he is viewed as having struck the mother lode from which success and glamour ow. Usually we

dismiss such popular mythmaking for the dream stu it is, but it continues to perform certain useful, if covert, functions: it delights and encourages by celebrating feats of self-achievement; it reminds us of those negative circumstances that render success both di cult and risky; and in its riddling fashion it allows us to approach American experience with an unthreatening sense of wonder. In its fanciful way it poses the old abiding questions of who and what is

“American,” and asks, “By what dint of e ort or turn of fate is

‘Americanness’ achieved?”

Usually we are far too busy just *being* American to give these questions much conscious thought, but they keep popping up to haunt us, in this instance, when Malamud’s accomplishments raise the issue of how it is that

a member of a minority group can win recognition as a representative American writer. How, in other words, has Malamud been able to speak to the wholeness of American experience when the diversity of the whole is so much greater and more unavailable than its parts?

These questions issue from the interaction between our culture, politics, and the uid character of American social hierarchy.

Although held in a volatile synthesis by intricate structures and processes of law and politics, our people spring from such a diversity of backgrounds and traditions that American culture constitutes a “culture of cultures”—and these are always in con ict as they repel and attract and blend, each with the other. Related to this is our plurality of social classes, the discrete divisions among both our rich and our poor, as among and within our ethnic and religious groupings. Thus our con icting social and economic interests make for a rock-and-roll shifting of political alignments.

Here private lives are invaded by public disrelationships, and our national morality has unchartered consequences in private fates.

As Malamud knows all too well, it is one thing to embrace the ideal of democracy, but quite another to live peacefully with the responsibilities and sacri ces that ow therefrom. Hence we live in a symbolic state of civil war, and are bedeviled by a built-in conundrum which constantly questions our moral identity by

measuring our assertions of democratic faith against the undemocratic contents of our attitudes and actions.

Bonded by the democratic ideal, we identify with each other as members of a single nation, but we also share the guilt which arises from our endless contentions. If in a general sense we are brothers, in speci c relationships we can be so uncertain that the slightest disagreement can transform us into hostile strangers. Worse, the inescapable fact that our communal bond fails so often to provide communication across our divisions of race, creed, background and tradition makes for a state of free-oating embarrassment.

Fortunately ours is a prosperous country, and along with its self-evident opportunities for social advancement our national morale is sustained by optimism, by our belief in “progress,” and by our famous “American humor.” These allow us to deal pragmatically with our inconsistencies, and we laugh at one another even though it is often in order to keep from crying.

Still, on a deeper, more tragic level of our minds, we realize that our “national unity” is actually less fact than political ction, a future condition to which we were committed by the Founding Fathers. Thus democratic equality is sometimes a goal toward which we advance with Old Glory ying, and again a combat zone from which we retreat in dereliction of our most sacred commitments.

From this perspective we are all at some point or another secessionists.

For any novelist, the contradictions arising from our unity-within-diversity pose both a mystery and a challenge, especially for one of minority background. Because for him our complaints born of social inequity join up with his ction-writer’s compulsion to recreate the real-life drama of American social hierarchy. When he confronts its ba ing mixture of order and chaos he discovers that he has committed himself to the task of disentangling the pathologies of democracy from its failures, its attempts at melioration, and its assertions of a transcendent ideal. As ctionist he seeks to reduce the complexity of experience to eloquent form, but in doing so he risks the embarrassment of not only violating the self-protective pieties of other groups, but of exposing the self-serving maneuvering

of his own. Naturally this makes him no less a target for censure than for praise. But whether he chooses the modes of tragedy or comedy or a combination of both, he descends imaginatively into the underworld of democracy and a realm of fear and hatred, stereotypes and bias, code words and epithets, and these must be depicted in the context of his characters’ e orts to achieve their better selves.

Not that it is the novelist’s role to “create the uncreated conscience” of his group or nation, for that was in motion long ago; rather it is to sensitize the nation’s ever-oundering conscience by making us conscious of the strengths

in our weaknesses and the triumphs in our failures. Thus, even when concerned mainly with the perfection of his art, the novelist nds himself compelled to consider the moral and political consequences of his ction. His raw material consists of a society caught in the process of being improvised out of the democractic ideal as pragmatically as any tall tale is spun out of the recurring adventures of hunter, sherman, beggarman or trickster. In order to achieve the maximum resonance from his symbolic actions he must hang loose and try to be as receptive, resourceful and encompassing in capturing truth as his larger subject is in evading it.

For whatever else a novelist of minority background happens to be, he too shares the American dream and its compulsions. So while remaining true to his own group's unique perception of experience, he is also goaded to add his individual voice to the futuristic e ort of ful lling the democratic ideal. He too acts to describe the nation to itself, and sometimes in making his own segment of experience available to all he manages to reduce our social confusion to forms of lucid insight. When this occurs he is able to dispel some of the hierarchal embarrassment and generalized "anxiety of diversity"

endemic to American society.

Malamud demonstrates that in this e ort a minority background is far from a hindrance. Indeed, such artists are indispensable in rendering crucial aspects of our common reality. For we are in fact a nation of minorities, and if the reality of one is neglected, the common truth of experience is done incalculable violence. Thus

when a writer of Malamud's gifts confronts the mystery of our unity-within-diversity and clings faithfully to his own perception of truth, he transcends the given in the interest of the ideal. By following the artistic standards and moral dictates of the novel, he not only reinvigorates the American language, but clari es our perception of reality. By speaking resonantly for himself he speaks the truth in di erent accents. This is his answer to the mystery of how, in a nation of minorities, the last becomes rst and outstanding among equals.

Therein lies the magic in Malamud's barrel of ction, and the secret of its power to assault the ctions and hypocrisies of politics.

Yes, and therein lie the possibilities for writers of minority background to render the complex wholeness of American experience. Malamud has performed such feats of ctional magic again and again. He is an artist who entertains us as he instructs us, and if he upsets our complacency as he ranges from comedy to tragedy, that is the price we must pay for being transported into his world of possibility.

Bern, this marvelous object is no ction; it is all true gold and loaded with magical a ect that far out-gleams its material substance. It is my pleasure to extend it to you as a symbolic expression of the high regard and deep admiration with which you and your work are held by our friends and colleagues, all of whom recognize all too well how di cult a feat it is to contribute a new and resonant note to that diverse unity of ctional expression which is American literature.

INTRODUCTION TO THE THIRTIETH-ANNIVERSARY EDITION OF *INVISIBLE MAN*

In 1981 Ellison wrote this extended introduction—part memoir, part meditation, part vernacular and mythic tall tale, perhaps—about the birth of Invisible Man. *It was published in the thirtieth-anniversary edition in 1982*.

WHAT, if anything, is there that a novelist can say about his work that wouldn't be better left to the critics? They at least have the advantage of dealing with the words on the page, while for him the task of accounting for the process involved in putting them there is similar to that of commanding a smoky genie to make an orderly retreat—not simply back into the traditional bottle, but into the ribbon and keys of a by now defunct typewriter. And in this particular instance all the more so, because from the moment of its unexpected inception this has been a most self-willed and self-generating piece of ction. For at a time when I was struggling with a quite di erent narrative, it announced itself in what were to become the opening words of its prologue, moved in, and proceeded to challenge my

imagination for some seven years. What is more, despite its peacetime scenery it erupted out of what had been conceived as a war novel.

It all began during the summer of 1945, in a barn in Waits eld, Vermont, where I was on sick leave from service in the merchant marine, and with the war's end it continued to preoccupy me in various parts of New York City, including its crowded subways, in a converted 141st Street stable, in a one-room ground oor apartment on St. Nicholas Avenue, and, most unexpectedly, in a suite otherwise occupied by jewelers located on the eighth oor of 608

Fifth Avenue. It was there, thanks to the generosity of Beatrice and Francis Steegmuller, then spending a year abroad, that I discovered that writing could be just as di cult in a fellow writer's elegant o ce as in a crowded Harlem apartment. There were, however, important di erences, some of which worked wonders for my shaky selfcon dence and served, perhaps, as a catalyst for the wild mixture of elements that went into the evolving ction.

The proprietors of the suite, Sam and Augusta Mann, saw to it that I worked undisturbed, took time o for lunch (often at their own expense), and were most encouraging of my e orts. Thanks to them I found myself keeping a businessman's respectable hours, and the suite's constant ow of beautiful objects and its occupants'

expert evaluations of pearls, diamonds, platinum and gold gave me

a sense of living far above my means. Thus actually and symbolically the eighth oor was the highest elevation upon which the novel unfolded, but it was a long, far cry from our below-street-level apartment and might well have proved disorientating had I not been consciously concerned with a ctional character who was bent upon nding his way in areas of society whose manners, motives and rituals were ba ing.

Interestingly enough, it was only the elevator operators who questioned my presence in such an a uent building, but this, after all, was during a period when the doormen of buildings located in middle-and upper-class neighborhoods routinely directed such as myself to their service elevators. I hasten to add, however, that nothing of the kind ever happened at 608, for

once the elevator men became accustomed to my presence they were quite friendly. And this was true even of the well-read immigrant among them who found the idea of my being a writer amusing.

By contrast, certain of my St. Nicholas Avenue neighbors considered me of questionable character. This ostensibly was because Fanny, my wife, came and went with the regularity of one who held a conventional job, while I was often at home and could be seen at odd hours walking our Scottish terriers. But basically it was because I t none of the roles, legal or illegal, with which my neighbors were familiar. I was neither a thug, numbers runner, pusher, postal worker, doctor, dentist, lawyer, tailor, undertaker, barber, bartender nor preacher. And while my speech revealed a degree of higher education, it was also clear that I was not of the group of professionals who lived or worked in the neighborhood.

My inde nite status was therefore a subject of speculation and a source of unease, especially among those whose attitudes and modes of conduct were at odds with the dictates of law and order. This made for a nodding relationship in which my neighbors kept their distance and I kept mine. But I remained suspect, and one snowy afternoon as I walked down a shady street into the winter sunshine a wino lady let me know exactly how I rated on her checklist of sundry types and characters. Leaning Wearily against the façade of a corner bar as I approached, and directing her remarks at me through

her woozy companions, she said, “Now that nigger *there* must be some kinda sweetback, ’cause while his wife has her some kinda little ‘slave,’ all I ever see *him* do is walk them damn dogs and shoot some damn pictures!”

I was startled by such a low rating, for by “sweetback” she meant a man who lived o the earnings of a woman, a type usually identi ed by his leisure, ashy clothes, amboyant personal style and the ruthless business enterprise of an out-and-out pimp—all qualities which I was so conspicuously lacking that she had to laugh at her own provocative sally. However, the ploy was intended to elicit a response, whether angry or conciliatory she was too drunk or reckless to care as long as it threw some light into the shadows of my existence. Therefore I was less annoyed than amused, and since I was returning home with fty legally earned dollars from a photographic

assignment, I could well a ord to smile while remaining silently concealed in my mystery.

Even so, the wino lady had come close to one of the economic arrangements which made my writing a possibility, and that too is part of the story behind this novel. My wife did indeed provide the more dependable contributions to our income, while mine came catch-as-catch-can. During the time the novel was in progress she worked as a secretary for several organizations and was to crown her working career as the executive director of the American Medical Center for Burma, a group that supported the work of Dr.

Gordon S. Seagrave, the famous “Burma Surgeon.” As for myself, I reviewed a few books, sold a few articles and short stories, did freelance photography (including book-jacket portraits of Francis Steegmuller and Mary McCarthy), built audio ampli ers and installed high-delity sound systems. There were also a few savings from my work on ships, a Rosenwald grant and its renewal, a small publisher’s advance, and for a while a monthly stipend from our friend and patron of the arts, the late Mrs. J. Caesar Guggenheimer.

Naturally our neighbors knew nothing of this, and neither did our landlord, who considered writing to be such a questionable occupation for a healthy young man that during our absence he was not above entering our apartment and prowling through my papers.

Still, such annoyances were to be endured as a part of the desperate gamble involved in my becoming a novelist. Fortunately my wife had faith in my talent, a ne sense of humor and a capacity for neighborly charity. Nor was I unappreciative of the hilarious inversion of what is usually a racially restricted social mobility that took me on daily journeys from a Negro neighborhood, wherein strangers questioned my moral character on nothing more substantial than our common color and my vague deviation from accepted norms, to nd sanctuary in a predominantly white environment wherein that same color and vagueness of role rendered me anonymous, and hence beyond public concern. In retrospect it was as though writing about invisibility had rendered me either transparent or opaque and set me bouncing back and forth between the benighted provincialism of a small

village and the benign disinterestedness of a great metropolis. Which, given the di culty of gaining an authorial knowledge of this diverse society, was not a bad discipline for an American writer.

But the Fifth Avenue interval aside, most of the novel still managed to get itself written in Harlem, where it drew much of its substance from the voices, idioms, folklore, traditions and political concerns of those whose racial and cultural origins I share. So much, then, for the economics, geography and sociology of the struggle sustained in writing the novel, and back to the circumstances in which it began.

The narrative that was upstaged by the voice which spoke so knowingly of invisibility (pertinent here because it turned out to have been a blundering step toward the present novel) focused upon the experiences of a captured American pilot who found himself in a Nazi prisoner-of-war camp in which he was the o cer of highest rank, and thus by a convention of war the designated spokesman for his fellow prisoners. Predictably, the dramatic con ict arose from the fact that he was the only Negro among the Americans, and the resulting racial tension was exploited by the German camp commander for his own amusement. Having to choose between his passionate rejection of both native and foreign racisms while upholding those democratic values which he held in common with

his white countrymen, my pilot was forced to nd support for his morale in his sense of individual dignity and in his newly awakened awareness of human loneliness. For him that war-born vision of virile fraternity of which Malraux wrote so eloquently was not forthcoming, and much to his surprise he found his only justi cation for attempting to deal with his countrymen as comrades-in-arms lay precisely in those old betrayed promises proclaimed in such national slogans and turns-of-phrase as those the hero of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* had found so obscene during the chaotic retreat from Caporetto. But while Hemingway's hero managed to put the war behind him and opt for love, for my pilot there was neither escape nor a loved one waiting. Therefore he had either to a rm the transcendent ideals of democracy and his own dignity by aiding those who despised him, or accept his situation as hopelessly devoid of meaning, a choice tantamount

to rejecting his own humanity. The crowning irony of all this lay in the fact that neither of his adversaries was aware of his inner struggle.

Undramatized, all this might sound a bit extreme, yet historically most of this nation's con icts of arms have been—at least for Afro-Americans—wars within wars. Such was true of the Civil War, the last of the Indian Wars, of the Spanish-American War, and of World Wars I and II. And in order for the Negro to ful ll his duty as a citizen it was often necessary that he ght for his self-a rmed right to ght. Accordingly, my pilot was prepared to make the ultimate wartime sacri ce that most governments demand of their able-bodied citizens, but his was one that regarded his life as of lesser value than the lives of whites making the same sacri ce. This reality made for an existential torture, which was given a further twist of the screw by his awareness that once the peace was signed, the German camp commander could immigrate to the United States and immediately take advantage of freedoms that were denied the most heroic of Negro servicemen. Thus, democratic ideals and military valor alike were rendered absurd by the prevailing mystique of race and color.

I myself had chosen the merchant marine as a more democratic mode of service (as had a former colleague, a poet, who was lost o

Murmansk on his rst trip to sea), and as a seaman ashore in Europe I had been encountering numerous Negro soldiers who gave me vivid accounts of the less-than-democratic conditions under which they fought and labored. But having had a father who fought on San Juan Hill, in the Philippines and in China, I knew that such complaints grew out of what was by then an archetypical American dilemma: how could you treat a Negro as equal in war and then deny him equality during times of peace? I also knew something of the trials of Negro airmen, who after being trained in segregated units and undergoing the abuse of white o cers and civilians alike were prevented from ying combat missions.

Indeed, I had published a short story which dealt with such a situation, and it was in this attempt to convert experience into ction that I discovered that its implicit drama was far more complex than I had assumed. For while I had conceived of it in terms of a black-white, majority-minority con ict, with white o cers refusing to recognize the humanity of a Negro who saw

mastering the highly technical skills of a pilot as a digni ed way of serving his country while improving his economic status, I came to realize that my pilot was also experiencing di culty in seeing *himself*. This had to do with his ambivalence before his own group's divisions of class and diversities of culture—an ambivalence which was brought into focus after he crash-landed on a Southern plantation and found himself being aided by a Negro tenant farmer whose outlook and folkways were a painful reminder of his own tenuous military status and their common origin in slavery. A man of two worlds, my pilot felt himself to be misperceived in both, and thus was at ease in neither. In brief, the story depicted his conscious struggle for self-de nition and for an invulnerable support for his individual dignity. I by no means was aware of this relationship to the invisible man, but clearly he possessed some of the symptoms.

During the same period I had published yet another story in which a young Afro-American seaman, ashore in Swansea, South Wales, was forced to grapple with the troublesome "American"

aspects of his identity after white Americans had blacked his eye during a wartime blackout on the Swansea street called Straight (no,

his name was *not* Saul, nor did he become a Paul!). But here the pressure toward self-scrutiny came from a group of Welshmen who rescued him and surprised him by greeting him as a "Black Yank"

and inviting him to a private club, and then sang the American national anthem in his honor. Both stories were published in 1944, but now in 1945 on a Vermont farm, the theme of a young Negro's quest for identity was reasserting itself in a far more bewildering form.

For while I had structured my short stories out of familiar experiences and possessed concrete images of my characters and their backgrounds, now I was confronted by nothing more substantial than a taunting, disembodied voice. And while I was in the process of plotting a novel based on the war then in progress, the con ict which that voice was imposing upon my attention was one that had been ongoing since the Civil War. Given the experiences of the past, I had felt on safe historical grounds even though the literary problem of conveying the complex human emotions and

philosophical decisions faced by a unique individual remained. It was, I thought, an intriguing idea for an American novel, but a di cult task for a edgling novelist. Therefore I was most annoyed to have my e orts interrupted by an ironic, down-home voice that struck me as being as irreverent as a honky-tonk trumpet blasting through a performance, say, of Britten's *War Requiem*.

And all the more so because the voice seemed well aware that a piece of science ction was the last thing I aspired to write. In fact, it seemed to tease me with allusions to that pseudoscienti c sociological concept which held that most Afro-American di culties sprang from our "high visibility"; a phrase as double-dealing and insidious as its more recent oxymoronic cousins, "benign neglect"

and "reverse discrimination," both of which translate as "Keep those Negroes running—but in their same old place." My friends had made wry jokes out of the term for many years, suggesting that while the darker brother was clearly "checked and balanced"—and kept far more checked than balanced—on the basis of his darkness he glowed nevertheless within the American conscience with such

intensity that most whites feigned moral blindness toward his predicament; these included the waves of late arrivals who refused to recognize the vast extent to which they too bene ted from his second-class status while placing all of the blame on white Southerners.

Thus, despite the bland assertions of sociologists, "high visibility"

actually rendered one un-visible—whether at high noon in Macy's window or illuminated by aming torches and ashbulbs while undergoing the ritual sacri ce that was dedicated to the ideal of white supremacy. After such knowledge, and given the persistence of racial violence and the unavailability of legal protection, I asked myself, what else *was* there to sustain our will to persevere but laughter? And could it be that there was a subtle triumph hidden in such laughter that I had missed, but one which still was more a rmative than raw anger? A secret, hard-earned wisdom that might, perhaps, o er a more e ective strategy through which a oundering Afro-American novelist could convey his vision?

It was a startling idea, yet the voice was so persuasive with echoes of blues-toned laughter that I found myself being nudged toward a frame of mind in which suddenly current events, memories and artifacts began combining to form a vague but intriguing new perspective.

Shortly before the spokesman for invisibility intruded, I had seen in a nearby Vermont village a poster announcing the performance of a "Tom Show," that forgotten term for blackface minstrel versions of Mrs. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. I had thought such entertainment a thing of the past, but there in a quiet northern village it was alive and kicking, with Eliza, frantically slipping and sliding on the ice, still trying—and this during World War II!—to escape the slavering hounds.… *Oh, I went to the hills To hide my face The hills cried out, No hiding place There's no hiding place Up here!*

No, because what is commonly assumed to be past history is actually as much a part of the living present as William Faulkner insisted. Furtive, implacable and tricky, it inspirits both the observer and the scene observed, artifacts, manners and atmosphere, and it speaks even when no one wills to listen.

So as I listened, things once obscure began falling into place. Odd things, unexpected things. Such as the poster that reminded me of the tenacity which a nation's moral evasions can take on when given the trappings of racial stereotypes, and the ease with which its deepest experience of tragedy could be converted into blackface farce. Even information picked up about the backgrounds of friends and acquaintances fell into the slowly emerging pattern of implication. The wife of the racially mixed couple who were our hosts was the granddaughter of a Vermonter who had been a general in the Civil War, adding a new dimension to the poster's presence. Details of old photographs, rhymes, riddles, children's games, church services, college ceremonies, practical jokes and political activities observed during my prewar days in Harlem—all fell into place. I had reported the riot of 1943 for the *New York Post*, had agitated earlier for the release of Angelo Herndon and the Scottsboro Boys, had marched behind Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., in his e ort to desegregate the stores along 125th Street, and had

been part of a throng which blocked o Fifth Avenue in protest of the role being played by Germany and Italy in the Spanish Civil War.

Everything and anything appeared as grist for my ctional mill, some speaking up clearly, saying, “Use me right here,” while others were disturbingly mysterious.

Like my sudden recall of an incident from my college days when, opening a vat of Plasticine donated to an invalid sculptor friend by some Northern studio, I found enfolded within the oily mass a frieze of gures modeled after those depicted on Saint-Gaudens’s monument to Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and his 54th Massachusetts Negro Regiment, a memorial which stands on the Boston Common. I had no idea why it should surface, but perhaps it was to remind me that since I was writing ction and seeking vaguely for images of black and white fraternity I would do well to recall that Henry James’s brother Wilky had fought as an o cer with those Negro soldiers, and that Colonel Shaw’s body had been thrown into a ditch with those of his men. Perhaps it was also to remind me that war could, with art, be transformed into something deeper and more meaningful than its surface violence.

At any rate, it now appeared that the voice of invisibility issued from deep within our complex American underground. So how crazy-logical that I should nally locate its owner living—and oh, so garrulously—in an abandoned cellar. Of course the process was far more disjointed than I make it sound, but such was the inner-outer, subjective-objective process of the developing ction, its pied rind and surreal heart.

Even so, I was still inclined to close my ears and get on with my interrupted novel, but like many writers atoss in what Conrad described as the “destructive element,” I had oundered into a state of hyper-receptivity, a desperate condition in which a ction writer nds it di cult to ignore even the most nebulous idea-emotion that might arise in the process of creation. For he soon learns that such amorphous projections might well be unexpected gifts from his daydreaming muse that might, when properly perceived, provide exactly the materials needed to keep a oat in the turbulent tides of composition. On the other hand, they might wreck him, drown him in the quicksands of indecision. I was already having enough di culty trying to

avoid writing what might turn out to be nothing more than another novel of racial protest instead of the dramatic study in comparative humanity which I felt any worthwhile novel should be, and the voice appeared to be leading me precisely in that direction. But then as I listened to its taunting laughter and speculated on what kind of individual would speak in such accents, I decided that it would be one who had been forged in the underground of American experience and yet managed to emerge less angry than ironic. That he would be a blues-toned laughter-at-wounds who included himself in his indictment of the human condition. I liked the idea, and as I tried to visualize the speaker I came to relate him to those ongoing con icts, tragic and comic, that had claimed my group's energies since the abandonment of the Reconstruction. And after coaxing him into revealing a bit more about himself, I concluded that he was without question a

"character," and this in the dual meaning of the term. I saw that he was young, powerless (re ecting the di culties of Negro leaders of the period) and ambitious for a role of leadership—a role at which

he was doomed to fail. Having nothing to lose, and by way of providing myself with the widest eld for success or failure, I associated him, ever so distantly, with the narrator of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. With that *I* began to structure the movement of my plot, while *he* began to merge with my more specialized concerns with ctional form and with certain problems arising out of the pluralistic literary tradition from which I spring.

Among these was the question of why most protagonists of Afro-American ction (not to mention the black characters in ction written by whites) were without intellectual depth. Too often they were gures caught up in the most intense forms of social struggle, subject to the most extreme forms of the human predicament, yet seldom able to articulate the issues which tortured them. Not that many worthy individuals aren't in fact inarticulate, but that there were, and are, enough exceptions in real life to provide the perceptive novelist with models. And even if they did not exist it would be necessary, both in the interest of ctional expressiveness and as examples of human possibility, to invent them. Henry James had taught us much with his hyperconscious, "Super subtle fry,"

characters who embodied in their own cultured, upper-class way the American virtues of conscience and consciousness. Such ideal creatures were unlikely to turn up in the world I inhabited, but one never knew because so much in this society is unnoticed and unrecorded. On the other hand, I felt that one of the ever-present challenges facing the American novelist was that of endowing his inarticulate characters, scenes and social processes with eloquence.

For it is by such attempts that he ful lls his social responsibility as an American artist.

Here it would seem that the interests of art and democracy converge, with the development of conscious, articulate citizens an established goal of this democratic society, and the creation of conscious, articulate characters indispensable to the creation of resonant compositional centers through which an organic consistency can be achieved in the fashioning of ctional forms. By way of imposing meaning upon our disparate American experience the novelist seeks to create forms in which acts, scenes and

characters speak for more than their immediate selves, and in this enterprise the very nature of language is on his side. For by a trick of fate (our racial problems notwithstanding) the human imagination is integrative—and the same is true of the centrifugal force that inspirits the democratic process. And while ction is but a form of symbolic action, a mere game of "as if," therein lies its true function and its potential for e ecting change. For at its most serious, just as is true of politics at its best, it is a thrust toward a human ideal. And it approaches that ideal by a subtle process of negating the world of things as given in favor of a complex of man-made positives.

So if the ideal of achieving a true political equality eludes us in reality—as it continues to do—there is still available that ctional *vision* of an ideal democracy in which the actual combines with the ideal and gives us representations of a state of things in which the highly placed and the lowly, the black and the white, the Northerner and the Southerner, the native-born and the immigrant combine to tell us of transcendent truths and possibilities such as those discovered when Mark Twain set Huck and Jim a oat on the raft.

Which suggested to me that a novel could be fashioned as a raft of hope, perception and entertainment that might help keep us a oat as we tried to negotiate the snags and whirlpools that mark our nation's vascillating course toward and away from the democratic ideal.

There are, of course, other goals for ction. Yet I recalled that during the early, more optimistic days of this republic it was assumed that each individual citizen could become (and should prepare to become) President. For democracy was considered not only a collectivity of individuals, as was de ned by W. H. Auden, but a collectivity of politically astute citizens who, by virtue of our vaunted system of universal education and our freedom of opportunity, would be prepared to govern. As things turned out it was an unlikely possibility—but not entirely, as attested by the recent examples of the peanut farmer and the motion-picture actor.

Even for Afro-Americans there was the brief hope that had been encouraged by the presence of black congressmen in Washington during the Reconstruction. Nor could I see any reason for allowing our more chastened

view of political possibility (not long before I began this novel A. Phillip Randolph had to threaten our beloved F.D.R. with a march on Washington before our war industries were opened to Negroes) to impose undue restrictions upon my novelist's freedom to manipulate imaginatively those possibilities that existed both in Afro-American personality and in the restricted structure of American society. My task was to transcend those restrictions. As an example, Mark Twain had demonstrated that the novel *could* serve as a comic antidote to the ailments of politics, and since in 1945, as well as now, Afro-Americans were usually defeated in their bouts with circumstance, there was no reason why they, like Brer Rabbit and his more literary cousins, the great heroes of tragedy and comedy, shouldn't be allowed to snatch the victory of conscious perception from the forces that overwhelmed them. Therefore I would have to create a narrator who could think as well as act, and I saw a capacity for conscious self-assertion as basic to his blundering quest for freedom.

So my task was one of revealing the human universals hidden within the plight of one who was both black and American, and not only as a means of conveying my personal vision of possibility, but as a way of dealing with the sheer rhetorical challenge involved in communicating across our barriers of race and religion, class, color and region—barriers which consist of the many strategies of division that were designed, and still function, to prevent what would otherwise have been a more or less natural recognition of the reality of black and white fraternity. And to defeat this national tendency to deny the common humanity shared by my character and those who might happen to read of his experience, I would have to provide him with something of a world view, give him a consciousness in which serious philosophical questions could be raised, provide him with a range of diction that could play upon the richness of our readily shared vernacular speech, and construct a plot that would bring him in contact with a variety of American

types as they operated on various levels of society. Most of all, I would have to approach racial stereotypes as a given fact of the social process and proceed, while gambling with the reader's capacity for ctional truth, to reveal the human complexity which stereotypes are intended to conceal.

It would be misleading, however, to leave the impression that all the process of writing this book was so solemn, for in fact there was a great deal of fun along the way. I knew that I was composing a work of ction, a work of literary art and one that would allow me to take advantage of the novel's capacity for telling the truth while actually telling a "lie," which is the Afro-American folk term for an improvised story. Having worked in barbershops where that form of oral art ourished, I knew that I could draw upon the rich culture of the folk tale as well as that of the novel, and that uncertain of my skill, I would have to improvise upon my materials in the manner of a jazz musician putting a musical theme through a wild star-burst of metamorphosis. By the time I realized that the words of the Prologue contained the germ of the ending as well as that of the beginning, I was free to enjoy the surprises of incident and character as they popped into view.

And there were surprises. Five years before the book was completed, Frank Taylor, who had given me my rst book contract, showed a section to Cyril Connolly, the editor of the English magazine *Horizon*, and it was published in an issue devoted to art in America. This marked the initial publication of the rst chapter, which appeared in America shortly afterward in the 1948 volume of the now defunct *Magazine of the Year*—a circumstance which accounts for the 1947 and 1948 copyright dates that have caused confusion for scholars. The actual publication date of the complete volume was 1952.

These surprises were both encouraging and intimidating because after savoring that bit of success I became afraid that this single section, which contained the "Battle Royal" scene, might well be the novel's only incident of interest. But I persisted and nally arrived at the moment when it became meaningful to work with my editor, Albert Erskine. The rest, as the saying goes, is history. My highest

hope for the novel was that it would sell enough copies to prevent my publishers from losing their investment and my editor from having wasted his time. But as I said in the beginning, this has always been a most willful, most self-generating novel, and the proof of this statement is witnessed by the fact that here, thirty astounding years later, it has me writing about it again.

—November 10, 1981

GOING TO THE TERRITORY

E *llison's second book of essays was published in 1986. Except for "Society, Morality and the Novel" (1951), the selections were written or published between 1963 and 1986. The collection's mix of prose forms, like that of* Shadow and Act, *re ects Ellison's fascination with "making disparate materials into rhetorical wholes." Here, even more than in* Shadow and Act, *Ellison enacts the American journey to the territory, believing "that the territory is an ideal place—ever to be sought, ever to be missed, but always there."*

The Little Man at Chehaw Station

The American Artist and His Audience

IT was at Tuskegee Institute during the mid-1930s that I was made aware of the little man behind the stove. At the time I was a trumpeter majoring in music, and had aspirations of becoming a classical composer. As such, shortly before the little man came to my attention, I had outraged the faculty members who judged my monthly student's recital by substituting a certain skill of lips and ngers for the intelligent and artistic structuring of emotion that was demanded in performing the music assigned to me. Afterward, still dressed in my hired tuxedo, my ears burning from the harsh negatives of their criticism, I had sought solace in the basement studio of Hazel Harrison, a highly respected concert pianist and teacher. Miss Harrison had been one of Ferruccio Busoni's prize pupils, had lived (until the rise of Hitler had driven her back to a U.S.A. that was not yet ready to recognize her talents) in Busoni's home in Berlin, and was a friend of such masters as Egon Petri, Percy Grainger and Sergei Proko ev. It was not the rst time that I had appealed to Miss Harrison's generosity of spirit, but today her reaction to my rather adolescent complaint was less than sympathetic.

"But, baby," she said, "in this country you must always prepare yourself to play your very best wherever you are, and on all occasions."

"But everybody tells you that," I said.

“Yes,” she said, “but there’s more to it than you’re usually told. Of course you’ve always been taught to *do* your best, *look* your best, *be* your best. You’ve been told such things all your life. But now you’re becoming a musician, an artist, and when it comes to performing the classics in this country, there’s something more involved.”

Watching me closely, she paused. “Are you ready to listen?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“All right,” she said, “you must *always* play your best, even if it’s only in the waiting room at Chehaw Station, because in this country there’ll always be a little man hidden behind the stove.”

“A what?”

She nodded. “That’s right,” she said. “There’ll always be the little man whom you don’t expect, and he’ll know the *music*, and the *tradition*, and the standards of *musicianship* required for whatever you set out to perform!”

Speechless, I stared at her. After the working-over I’d just received from the faculty, I was in no mood for joking. But no, Miss Harrison’s face was quite serious. So what did she mean? Chehaw Station was a lonely whistle-stop where swift north-or southbound trains paused with haughty impatience to drop o or take on passengers; the point where, on homecoming weekends, special coaches crowded with festive visitors were cut loose, coupled to a waiting switch engine, and hauled to Tuskegee’s railroad siding. I knew it well, and as I stood beside Miss Harrison’s piano, visualizing the station, I told myself, *She has* got *to be kidding!*

For in my view, the atmosphere of Chehaw’s claustrophobic little waiting room was enough to discourage even a blind street musician from picking out blues on his guitar, no matter how tedious his wait for a train. Biased toward disaster by bruised feelings, my imagination pictured the vibrations set in motion by the winding of a trumpet within that drab, utilitarian structure: rst shattering, then bringing its walls “a-tumbling down”—like Jericho’s at the sounding of Joshua’s priest-blown ram horns.

True, Tuskegee possessed a rich musical tradition, both classical and folk, and many music lovers and musicians lived or moved through its environs, but—and my regard for Miss Harrison notwithstanding—Chehaw Station was the last place in the area where I would expect to encounter a connoisseur lying in wait to pounce upon some rash, unsuspecting musician. Sure, a connoisseur might hear the haunting, blues-echoing, train-whistle rhapsodies

blared by fast express trains as they thundered past, but the classics?

Not a chance!

So as Miss Harrison watched to see the e ect of her words, I said with a shrug, “Yes, ma’am.”

She smiled, her prominent eyes a-twinkle. “I hope so,” she said.

“But if you don’t just now, you will by the time you become an artist. So remember the little man behind the stove.”

With that, seating herself at her piano, she began thumbing through a sheaf of scores, a signal that our discussion was ended.

So, I thought, *you ask for sympathy and you get a riddle*. I would have felt better if she had said, “Sorry, baby, I know how you feel, but after all, I was *there*, I *heard* you, and you treated your audience as though you were some kind of con dence man with a horn. So forget it, because I will not violate my own standards by condoning sterile musicianship.” Some such reply, by rea rming the “sacred principles” of art to which we were both committed, would have done much to supply the emotional catharsis for which I was appealing. By refusing, she forced me to accept full responsibility and thus learn from my o ense. The condition of artistic communication is, as the saying goes, hard but fair.

But although disappointed and puzzled by Miss Harrison’s sibylline response, I respected her artistry and experience too highly to dismiss it. Besides, something about her warning of a cultivated taste that asserted its authority out of obscurity sounded faintly familiar. Hadn’t I once worked

for an eccentric millionaire who prowled the halls and ballrooms of his ne hotel looking like a derelict who had wandered in o the street? Yes! And woe unto the busboy or waiter, hallman or maid—or anyone else—caught debasing the standards of that old man's house. For then, lashing out with the abruptness of reality shattering the contrived façade of a practical joke, the apparent beggar revealed himself as an extremely irate and exacting host of taste.

Thus, as I leaned into the curve of Miss Harrison's Steinway and listened to an interpretation of a Liszt rhapsody (during which she carried on an enthusiastic, stylistic analysis of passages that Busoni himself had marked for expressional subtlety), the little man of

Chehaw Station xed himself in my memory. And so vividly that today he not only continues to engage my mind, but often materializes when I least expect him.

As, for instance, when I'm brooding over some problem of literary criticism —like, say, the rhetoric of American ction. Indeed, the little stove warmer has come to symbolize nothing less than the enigma of aesthetic communication in American democracy. I especially associate him with the metamorphic character of the general American audience, and with the unrecognized and unassimilated elements of its taste. For me he represents that unknown quality which renders the American audience far more than a receptive instrument that may be dominated through a skillful exercise of the sheerly "rhetorical" elements—the ash and ligree—of the artist's craft. While that audience is eager to be transported, astounded, thrilled, it counters the artist's manipulation of forms with an attitude of antagonistic cooperation, acting, for better or worse, as both collaborator and judge. Like a strange orchestra upon which a guest conductor would impose his artistic vision, it must be exhorted, persuaded, even wooed, as the price of its applause. It must be appealed to on the basis of what it assumes to be truth as a means of inducting it into new dimensions of artistic truth. By playing artfully upon the audience's sense of experience and form, the artist seeks to shape its emotions and perceptions to his vision, while it, in turn, simultaneously cooperates and resists, says yes and says no in an ittakes-two-to-tango binary response to his e ort. As representative of the American

audience writ small, the little man draws upon the uncodi ed *Americanness* of his experience, whether of life or of art, as he engages in a silent dialogue with the artist's exposition of forms, o ering or rejecting the work of art on the basis of what he feels to be its a rmation or distortion of American experience.

Perhaps if they were fully aware of his incongruous existence, the little man's neighbors would reject him as a source of confusion, a threat to social order, and a reminder of the un nished details of this powerful nation. But out of a stubborn individualism born of his democratic origins, he insists upon the cultural necessity of his role,

and argues that if he didn't exist, he would have to be invented. If he were not already manifest in the esh, he would still exist and function as an idea and ideal because—like such character traits as individualism, restlessness, self-reliance, love of the new, and so on

—he is a linguistic product of the American scene and language, and a manifestation of the idealistic action of the American word as it goads its users toward a perfection of our revolutionary ideals.

For the artist, a lightning rod attracting unexpected insights and a warning against stale preconceptions, the man behind Chehaw's stove also serves as a metaphor for those individuals we sometimes meet whose re nement of sensibility is inadequately explained by family background, formal education or social status. These individuals seem to have been sensitized by some obscure force that issues undetected from the chromatic scale of American social hierarchy: a force that throws o strange, ultrasonic ultrasemi-semitones that create within those attuned to its vibrations a mysterious enrichment of personality. In this, heredity doubtless plays an important role, but whatever that role may be, it would appear that culturally and environmentally such individuals are products of errant but sympathetic vibrations set up by the tension between America's social mobility, its universal education, and its relative freedom of cultural information. Characterized by a much broader "random accessibility" than class and economic restrictions would appear to allow, this cultural information includes many of the nest products of the arts and intellect—products that are so abundantly available in the form of books, graphics,

recordings, and pictorial reproductions as to escape sustained attempts at critical evaluation. Just how these characteristics operate in concert involves the mysterious interaction between environment and personality, instinct and culture. But the frequency and wide dispersal of individuals who reveal the e ects of this mysterious con guration of forces endows each American audience, whether of musician, poet, or plastic artist, with a special mystery of its own.

I say “mystery,” but perhaps the phenomenon is simply a product of our neglect of serious cultural introspection, our failure to conceive of our fractured, vernacular-weighted culture as an

intricate whole. And since there is no reliable sociology of the dispersal of ideas, styles, or tastes in this turbulent American society, it is possible that, personal origins aside, the cultural circumstances here described o er the intellectually adventurous individual what might be termed a broad “social mobility of intellect and taste”—plus an incalculable scale of possibilities for self-creation. While the force that seems to have sensitized those who share the little man of Chehaw Station’s unaccountable knowingness—call it a climate of free-oating sensibility—appears to be a random e ect generated by a society in which certain assertions of personality, formerly the prerogative of high social rank, have become the privilege of the anonymous and the lowly.

If this be true, the matter of the artist’s ability to identify the mixed background and general character of his audience can be more problematical than might be assumed. In the eld of literature it presents a problem of rhetoric, a question of how to fashion strategies of communication that will bridge the many divisions of background and taste which any representative American audience embodies. To the extent that American literature is both an art of discovery and an artistic agency for creating a consciousness of cultural identity, it is of such crucial importance as to demand of the artist not only an eclectic resourcefulness of skill, but an act of democratic faith. In this light, the American artist will do his best not only because of his dedication to his form and craft, but because he realizes that despite an inevitable unevenness of composition, the chances are that any American audience will conceal at least *one* individual whose

knowledge and taste will complement or surpass his own. This (to paraphrase Miss Harrison) is because even the most homogeneous audiences are culturally mixed and embody, in their relative anonymity, the mystery of American cultural identity.

This identity—tentative, controversial, constantly changing—is confusing to artist and audience alike. To the audience, because it is itself of mixed background, and seldom fully conscious of the cultural (or even political) implications of its own wide democratic range. To the artist, because in the broadest thrust of his e ort he directs his nest e ects to an abstract (and thus ideal) re nement of

sensibility which, because it is not the exclusive property of a highly visible elite, is di cult to pinpoint. As one who operates within the historical frame of his given art, the artist may direct himself to those who are conscious of the most advanced state of his art: his artistic peers. But if his work has social impact, which is one gauge of its success as symbolic communication, it will reach into unpredictable areas. Many of us, by the way, read our rst Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Mann in barbershops, and heard our rst opera on phonographs. Thus, the ideal level of sensibility to which the American artist would address himself tends to transcend the lines of class, religion, region, and race— oating, as it were, free in the crowd. There, like the memory registers of certain computer systems, it is simultaneously accessible at any point in American society. Such are the circumstances that render the little man at Chehaw Station not only possible but inevitable.

But who, then, *is* this little man of Miss Harrison's riddle? From behind what unlikely mask does he render his judgments? And by what magic of art can his most receptive attention, his grudging admiration, be excited? No idle questions these; like Shakespeare's Hamlet, the little man has his pride and complexity. He values his personal uniqueness, cherishes his privacy, and clings to that tricky democratic anonymity which makes locating him an unending challenge. Hamlet masked himself with madness; the little man plays mute. Drawn to the brightness of bright lights, he cloaks himself in invisibility—perhaps because in the shadow of his anonymity he can be both the vernacular cat who looks at (and listens to) the tradition-

bound or fad-struck king *and* the little boy who sees clearly the artist-emperor's pretentious nakedness. Garcia Lorca writes of a singer who presented an audience of *cante hondo* lovers with a voice and restraint of passion better suited to a recital of *bel canto*. "Hurray," responded a deadpan Spanish cousin of the ghost of Chehaw Station, "for the school of Paris!"

Which is to say that having been randomly exposed to diverse artistic conventions, the little man has learned to detect the true

transcendent ambience created by successful art from chic shinola.

"Form should t function," says he, "and style theme. Just as punishment should t crime—which it seldom does nowadays—or as a well-made shoe the foot." Something of an autodidact, he has his own hierarchal ranking of human values, both native American and universal. And along with these, his own range of pieties— lial, sacred, racial—which constitute, in e ect, the rhetorical "stops"

through which his sensibilities are made responsive to artistic structurings of symbolic form.

Connoisseur, critic, trickster, the little man is also a day-coach, cabin-class traveler, but the timing of his arrivals and departures is uncertain. Sometimes he's there, sometimes he's here. Being quintessentially American, he enjoys the joke, the confounding of hierarchal expectations fostered by his mask: that cultural incongruity through which he, like Brer Rabbit, is able to convert even the most decorous of audiences into his own brier patch and temper the chilliest of classics to his own vernacular taste. Hence, as a practitioner of art, a form of symbolic communication that depends upon a calculated re nement of statement and a ect, the American artist must also know the special qualities of that second instrument: his native audience; an audience upon which—arousing, frustrating, and ful lling its expectations to the conventionalized contours of symbolic action—he is called upon to play as a pianist upon a piano. But here a special, most American problem arises.

Thanks to the presence of the little man, this second instrument can be most unstable in its tuning, and downright ornery in its responses. In approaching it, the artist may, if he will, play fast and loose with modes and traditions, techniques and styles, but only at his peril does he treat an American audience as though it were as easily manipulated as a jukebox.

Reject the little man in the name of purity or as one who aspires beyond his social station or cultural capacity— ne! But it is worth remembering that one of the implicitly creative functions of art in the U.S.A. (and certainly of narrative art) is the de ning and correlating of diverse American experiences by bringing previously unknown patterns, details and emotions into view along with those

that are generally recognized. Here one of the highest awards of art is the achievement of that electrifying and creative collaboration between the work of art and its audience that occurs when, through the unifying force of its vision and its power to give meaningful focus to apparently unrelated emotions and experiences, art becomes simultaneously de nitive of speci c and universal truths.

In this country, the artist is free to choose, but cannot limit, his audience. He may ignore the unknown or unplaced sector of the public, but the mysti cations of snobbery are of no avail against the little man's art hunger. Having arrived at his interest in art through familiar but uncharted channels, he disdains its use either as a form of social climbing or of social exclusion. Democratically innocent of hierarchal striving, he takes his classics as he takes his tall tales or jazz: without frills. But while self-e acing, he is nevertheless given to a democratic touchiness, and is suspicious of all easy assumptions of superiority based upon appearances. When fretted by an obtuse artistic hand, he can be quite irritable, and what frets him utterly is any attitude that o ends his quite human pieties by ignorance or disregard for his existence.

And yet the little man feels no urge to impose censorship upon the artist. Possessing an American-vernacular receptivity to change, a healthy delight in creative attempts at formalizing irreverence, and a Yankee trader's respect for the experimental, he is repelled by works of art that would strip human experience, especially American experience, of its wonder and

stubborn complexity. Not that he demands that his own shadowy image be dragged into each and every artistic e ort; that would make a shambles of art's necessary illusion by violating the social reality in which he nds his being. It is enough that the artist (above all, the novelist, dramatist, poet) forge images of American experience that resonate symbolically with his own ubiquitous presence. In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway tells us, byway of outlining his background's in uence upon his moral judgments, that his family fortune was started by an Irish uncle who immigrated during the Civil War, paid a substitute to ght in his stead, and went on to become wealthy from war pro teering. Enough said! This takes hardly a paragraph,

but the themes of history, wealth and immigration are struck like so many notes on a chime. Assuming his Afro-American identity, costume and mask, the little man behind the stove would make the subtle symbolic connections among Gatsby's illfated social climbing, the wealthy wastrels whose manners and morals are the focus of the action, the tragic ironies echoing so faintly from the Civil War (that seedbed of so many Northern fortunes), and his own social condition; among the principles of democracy that form the ground upon which the novel's drama of manners and social hierarchy is enacted, and the cost to Gatsby of confusing the promises of democracy with the terms governing their attainment.

In so doing, the little underground-outsider would incorporate the inside-outsider Gatz-Gatsby's experience into his own, and his own into Gatsby's —a transposition that Gatsby would probably have abhorred but one that might have saved his life.

Or again, the little man, by imposing collaboratively his own vision of American experience upon that of the author, would extend the novel's truth to levels below the threshold of that frustrating and illusory social mobility which forms the core of Gatsby's anguish. Responding out of a knowledge of the manner in which the mystique of wealth is intertwined with the American mysteries of class and color, he would aid the author in achieving the more complex vision of American experience that was implicit in his material. As a citizen, the little man endures with a certain grace the social restrictions that limit his own social mobility, but *as a reader* he demands that the relationship between his own condition and that of those more

highly placed be recognized. He senses that American experience is of a whole, and he wants the interconnections revealed. This not out of a penchant for protest, nor out of petulant vanity, but because he sees his own condition as an inseparable part of a larger truth in which the high and the lowly, the known and the unrecognized, the comic and the tragic are woven into the American skein. Having been attuned at Chehaw Station to the clangor of diverse bell sounds, he asks not for *whom* the bell tolls, only that it be struck artfully and with that fullness of resonance which warns all men of man's fate. At his best he does

not ask for scapegoats, but for the hero as witness. How ironic it was that in the world of *The Great Gatsby* the witness who could have identi ed the driver of the death car that led to Gatsby's murder was a black man whose ability to communicate (and communication implies moral judgment) was of no more consequence to the action than that of an ox that might have observed Icarus's sad plunge into the sea. (This, by the way, is not intended as a criticism of Fitzgerald, but only to suggest some of the problems and possibilities of artistic communication in the U.S.A.) In this light, the little man is a cautionary gure who challenges the artist to reach out for new heights of expressiveness. If we ignore his possible presence, violence might well be done to that ideal of cultivated democratic sensibility which was the goal of the likes of Emerson and Whitman, and for which the man at Chehaw Station is a metaphor. Respect his presence and even the most avant-garde art may become an agency for raising the general level of artistic taste.

The work of art is, after all, an act of faith in our ability to communicate symbolically.

But why would Hazel Harrison associate her humble metaphor for the di usion of democratic sensibility with a mere whistle-stop?

Today I would guess that it was because Chehaw Station functioned as a point of arrival and departure for people representing a wide diversity of tastes and styles of living. Philanthropists, businessmen, sharecroppers, students and artistic types passed through its doors.

But the same, in a more exalted fashion, is true of Carnegie Hall and the Metropolitan Museum; all three structures are meeting places for motley mixtures of people. So while it might require a Melvillean imagination to reduce American society to the dimensions of either concert hall or railroad station, their common feature as gathering places, as juncture points for random assemblies of sensibilities, reminds us again that in this particular country even the most homogeneous gatherings of people are mixed and pluralistic.

Perhaps the mystery of American cultural identity contained in such motley mixtures arises out of our persistent attempts to reduce our cultural diversity to an easily recognizable unity.

On the other hand, Americans tend to focus on the diverse parts of their culture (with which they can more easily identify), rather than on its complex and pluralistic wholeness. But perhaps they identify with the parts because the whole is greater, if not of a di erent quality, than its parts. This di erence, that new and problematic quality—call it our “Americanness”—creates out of its incongruity an uneasiness within us, because it is a constant reminder that American democracy is not only a political collectivity of individuals, but culturally a collectivity of styles, tastes and traditions.

In this lies the source of many of our problems, especially those centering upon American identity. In relationship to the cultural whole, we are, all of us—white or black, native-born or immigrant—

members of minority groups. Beset by feelings of isolation because of the uid, pluralistic turbulence of the democratic process, we cling desperately to our own familiar fragment of the democratic rock, and from such fragments we confront our fellow Americans in that combat of civility, piety and tradition which is the drama of American social hierarchy. Holding desperately to our familiar turf, we engage in that ceaseless contention whose uneasily accepted but unrejectable purpose is the projection of an ever more encompassing and acceptable de nition of our corporate identity as Americans.

Usually this contest (our improvised moral equivalent for armed warfare) proceeds as a war of words, a clash of styles, or as rites of symbolic sacri ce in which cabalistic code words are used to designate victims consumed with an Aztec voracity for scapegoats.

Indeed, so frequently does this con ict erupt into physical violence that one sometimes wonders if there is any other viable possibility for co-existing in so abstract and futuristic a nation as this.

The rock, the terrain upon which we struggle, is itself abstract, a terrain of ideas that, although man-made, exerts the compelling force of the ideal, of the sublime: ideas that draw their power from the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. We stand, as we say, united in the name of these sacred principles. But indeed it is in the name of these same principles that

we ceaselessly contend, a rming our ideals even as we do them violence.

For while we are but human and thus given to the fears and temptations of the esh, we are dedicated to principles that are abstract, ideal, spiritual: principles that were conceived linguistically and committed to paper during that contention over political ideals and economic interests which was released and given focus during the period of our revolutionary break with traditional forms of society, principles that were enshrined—again linguistically

—in the documents of state upon which this nation was founded.

Actuated by passionate feats of revolutionary will which released that dynamic power for moralizing both man and nature, instinct and society, which is a property of linguistic forms of symbolic action, these principles —democracy, equality, individual freedom and universal justice—now move us as articles of faith. Holding them sacred, we act (or *fail* to act) in their names. And in the freewheeling fashion of words that are summoned up to name the ideal, they prod us ceaselessly toward the re nement and perfection of those formulations of policy and con gurations of social forms of which they are the signs and symbols. As we strive to conduct social action in accordance with the ideals they evoke, they in turn insist upon

being made esh. Inspiriting our minds and bodies, they dance around in our bones, spurring us to make them ever more manifest in the structures and processes of ourselves and our society. As a nation, we exist in the communication of our principles, and we argue over their application and interpretation as over the rights of property or the exercise and sharing of authority. As elsewhere, they in uence our expositions in the area of artistic form and are involved in our search for a system of aesthetics capable of projecting our corporate, pluralistic identity. They interrogate us endlessly as to who and what we are; they demand that we keep the democratic faith.

Words that evoke our principles are, according to Kenneth Burke, charismatic terms for transcendent order, for perfection. Being forms of symbolic action, they tend, through their nature as language, to sweep us in tow as they move by a process of linguistic

negation toward the ideal. As a form of *symbolic* action, they operate by negating nature as a given and amoral condition, creating endless series of man-made or man-imagined positives. By so doing, they nudge us toward that state of human rectitude for which, ideally, we strive. In this way, Burke contends, man uses language to moralize both nature and himself. Thus, in this nation the word democracy possesses the aura of what Burke calls a “god-term,” and all that we are and do exists in the magnitude of its intricate symbolism. It is the rock upon which we toil, and we thrive or wane in the communication of those symbols and processes set in motion in its name.

In our national beginnings, all redolent with Edenic promises, was the word *democratic,* and since we vowed in a war rite of blood and sacri ce to keep its commandments, we act in the name of a word made sacred. Yes, but since we are, as Burke holds, language-using, language-misusing animals—beings who are by nature vulnerable to both the negative *and* the positive promptings of language as symbolic action—we Americans are given to eating, regurgitating, and, alas, re-eating even our most sacred words. It is as though they contain a substance that is crucial to our national existence but that, except in minute and infrequently ingested doses, we nd extremely indigestible. Some would call this national habit of word-eating an exercise in the art of the impossible; others attribute it to the limitations imposed by

the human condition. Still others would describe it as springing from the pathology of social hierarchy, a reaction to certain built-in conditions of our democracy that are capable of amelioration but impossible to cure. Whatever the case may be, it would seem that for many our cultural diversity is as indigestible as the concept of democracy in which it is grounded.

For one thing, principles in action are enactments of ideals grounded in a vision of perfection that transcends the limitations of death and dying. By arousing in the believer a sense of the disrelation between the ideal and the actual, between the perfect word and the errant esh, they partake of mystery. Here the most agonizing mystery sponsored by the democratic ideal is that of our unity-in-diversity, our oneness-in-manyness. Pragmatically we

cooperate and communicate across this mystery, but the problem of identity that it poses often goads us to symbolic acts of disa liation.

So we seek psychic security from within our inherited divisions of the corporate American culture while gazing out upon our fellows with a mixed attitude of fear, suspicion and yearning. We repress an underlying anxiety aroused by the awareness that we are representative not only of one but of several overlapping and constantly shifting social categories, and we stress our a liation with that segment of the corporate culture which has emerged out of our parents' past—racial, cultural, religious—and which we assume, on the basis of such magical talismans as our mother's milk or father's beard, that we "know." Grounding our sense of identity in such primary and a ect-charged symbols, we seek to avoid the mysteries and pathologies of the democratic process. But that process was designed to overcome the dominance of tradition by promoting an open society in which the individual could achieve his potential unhindered by his ties to the past. Here, theoretically, social categories are open, and the individual is not only considered capable of transforming himself, but is encouraged to do so.

However, in undertaking such transformations he opts for that psychic uncertainty which is a condition of his achieving his potential, a state he yearns to avoid. So despite any self-assurance he might achieve in dealing with his familiars, he is nevertheless (and by the nature of his inde nite relationship to the uid social hierarchy) a lonely individual who must nd his

own way within a crowd of other lonely individuals. Here the security o ered by his familiar symbols of identity is equivocal. And an overdependence upon them as points of orientation leads him to become bemused, gazing backward at a swiftly receding—if not quasi-mythical—past, while stumbling headlong into a predescribed but unknown future.

So perhaps we shy from confronting our cultural wholeness because it o ers no easily recognizable points of rest, no facile certainties as to who, what or where (culturally or historically) we are. Instead, the whole is always in cacophonie motion. Constantly changing its mode, it appears as a vortex of discordant ways of living and tastes, values and traditions, a whirlpool of odds and ends

in which the past courses in uneasy juxtaposition with those bright, futuristic principles and promises to which we, as a nation, are politically committed. In our vaguely perceived here and now, even the sounds and symbols spun o by the clashing of group against group appear not only alarmingly o -key, but threatening to our inherited eyes, ears, and appetites. Thus in our intergroup familiarity there is a brooding strangeness, and in our underlying sense of alienation a poignant, although distrusted, sense of fraternity. Deep down, the American condition is a state of unease.

During the nineteenth century an attempt was made to impose a loose conceptual order upon the chaos of American society by viewing it as a melting pot. Today that metaphor is noisily rejected, vehemently disavowed. In fact, it has come under attack in the name of the newly fashionable code word “ethnicity,” reminding us that in this country code words are linguistic agencies for the designation of sacri cial victims, and are circulated to sanction the abandonment of policies and the degrading of ideas. So today, before the glaring inequities, unful lled promises and rich possibilities of democracy, we hear heady evocations of European, African and Asian backgrounds accompanied by chants proclaiming the inviolability of ancestral blood. Today blood magic and blood thinking, never really dormant in American society, are rampant among us, often leading to brutal racial assaults in areas where these seldom occurred before. And while this goes on, the challenge of arriving at an adequate de nition of American cultural identity goes unanswered. (What, by the way, is

one to make of a white youngster who, with a transistor radio screaming a Stevie Wonder tune glued to his ear, shouts racial epithets at black youngsters trying to swim at a public beach—and this in the name of the ethnic sanctity of what has been declared a neighborhood turf?) The proponents of ethnicity—ill concealing an underlying anxiety, and given a bizarre bebopish stridency by the obviously American vernacular inspiration of the costumes and rituals ragged out to dramatize their claims to ethnic (and genetic) insularity—have helped give our streets and campuses a rowdy, All Fool's Day carnival atmosphere. In many ways, then, the call for a new social

order based upon the glori cation of ancestral blood and ethnic background acts as a call to cultural and aesthetic chaos. Yet while this latest farcical phase in the drama of American social hierarchy unfolds, the irrepressible movement of American culture toward the integration of its diverse elements continues, confounding the circumlocutions of its staunchest opponents.

In this regard I am reminded of a light-skinned, blue-eyed, Afro-American-featured individual who could have been taken for anything from a sun-tinged white Anglo-Saxon, an Egyptian, or a mixed-breed American Indian to a strayed member of certain tribes of Jews. This young man appeared one sunny Sunday afternoon on New York's Riverside Drive near 151st Street, where he disrupted the visual peace of the promenading throng by racing up in a shiny new blue Volkswagen Beetle decked out with a gleaming Rolls-Royce radiator. As the ow of strollers came to an abrupt halt, this man of parts emerged from his carriage with something of that magical cornucopian combustion by which a dozen circus clowns are exploded from an even more miniaturized automobile. Looming as tall as a professional basketball center, he unfolded himself and stretched to his full imposing height.

Clad in handsome black riding boots and fawn-colored riding breeches of English tailoring, he took the curb wielding, with an ultra-pukka-sahib haughtiness, a leather riding crop. A dashy dashiki (as bright and as many-colored as the coat that initiated poor Joseph's troubles in biblical times) owed from his broad shoulders down to the arrogant, military are of his

breeches-tops, while six feet six inches or so above his heels, a black homburg hat tilted at a jaunty angle oated majestically on the crest of his huge Afro-coi ed head.

As though all this were not enough to amaze, delight, or discombobulate his observers—or precipitate an international incident involving charges of a crass invasion of stylistic boundaries

—this apparition proceeded to unlimber an expensive Japanese single-lens re ex camera, position it atop the ornamental masonry balustrade which girds Riverside Park in that area, and activate its self-timer. Then, with a ballet leap across the walk, he assumed a

position beside his car. There he rested his elbow upon its top, smiled, and gave himself sharp movie director's commands as to desired poses, then began taking a series of self-portraits. This done, he placed the camera upon the hood of his Volkswagen and took another series of self-shots in which, manipulating a lengthy ebony cigarette holder, he posed himself in various fanciful attitudes against the not-too-distant background of the George Washington Bridge. All in all, he made a scene to haunt one's midnight dreams and one's noon repose.

Now, I can only speculate about what was going on in the elegant gentleman's mind, who he was, or what visual statement he intended to communicate. I only know that his carefully stylized movements (especially his "pimp-limp" walk) marked him as a native of the U.S.A., a home-boy bent upon projecting and recording with native verve something of his complex sense of cultural identity. Clearly he had his own style, but if—as has been repeatedly argued—the style is the man, who on earth was this fellow? Viewed from a rigid ethno-cultural perspective, neither his features nor his car nor his dress was of a whole. Yet he conducted himself with an obvious pride of person and of property, inviting all and sundry to admire and wonder in response to himself as his own sign and symbol, his own work of art. He had gotten himself, as the Harlem saying goes, "together," and whatever sheerly ethnic identity was communicated by his costume depended upon the observer's ability to see order in an apparent cultural chaos. The man himself was hidden somewhere within, his complex identity concealed by his aesthetic gesturing. And his essence lay not in the

somewhat comic clashing of styles, but in the mixture, the improvised form, the willful juxtaposition of modes.

Perhaps to the jaundiced eyes of an adversary of the melting-pot concept, the man would have appeared to be a militant black nationalist bent upon dramatizing his feelings of alienation—and he may have been. But most surely he was not an African or an Englishman. His Volks-Rolls-Royce might well have been loaded with Marxist tracts and Molotov cocktails, but his clashing of styles nevertheless sounded an integrative, vernacular note, an American

compulsion to improvise upon the given. His garments were, literally and guratively, of many colors and cultures, his racial identity interwoven of many strands. Whatever his politics, sources of income, hierarchal status and such, he revealed his essential

“Americanness” in his freewheeling assault upon traditional forms of the Western aesthetic. Whatever the identity he presumed to project, he was exercising an American freedom and was a product of the melting pot and the conscious or unconscious comedy it brews. Culturally he was an American joker. If his Afro and dashiki symbolized protest, his boots, camera, Volkswagen and homburg imposed certain quali cations upon that protest. In doing so, they played irreverently upon the symbolism of status, property and authority, and suggested new possibilities of perfection. More than expressing protest, these symbols ask the old, abiding American questions: Who am I? What about me?

Still, ignoring such questions (as they would ignore the little man of Chehaw Station), the opponents of the melting-pot concept utter their disavowals with an old-fashioned, camp-meeting fervor—

solemnly, and with an air of divine revelation. Most amazingly, these attacks upon the melting pot are led by the descendants of peasants or slaves or inhabitants of European ghettos, people whose status as spokesmen is a product of that very melting of hierarchal barriers they now deny. With such an attitude, it is fortunate that they, too, are caught up in the society’s built-in, democracy-prodded movement toward a perfection of self-de nition. Hence such disavowals, despite their negative posture, have

their positive content. And to the extent that they are negatives uttered in an attempt to create certain attitudes and conditions that their exponents conceive as positives, these disavowals are, in part, a rmations of the diverse and unique pasts out of which have emerged the many groups that this nation comprises. As such they might well contribute to a clari cation of our pluralistic cultural identity, and are thus a step in the direction of creating a much-needed cultural introspection.

As of now, however, I see the denial of that goal of cultural integration for which the melting pot was an accented metaphor as

the current form of an abiding American self-distrust. I see it as an e ort to dismiss the mystery of American identity (our unity-within-diversity) with a gesture of democracy-weary resignation, as an attempt to dispel by sociological word-magic the turbulence of the present, and as a self-satis ed vote against that hope which is so crucial to our cultural and political ful llment. For if such disavowals be viable, what about the little man behind the stove?

Ironically, the attacks on the melting-pot idea issue from those who have "made it." Having been reborn into a higher hierarchal status, they now view those who have *not* made it as threats to their newly achieved status, and therefore would change both the rules and the game plan. Thus they demonstrate anew the built-in opportunism of their characteristically American shortness of memory. But lest we ourselves forget, the melting-pot concept was never so simplistic or abstract as current arguments would have it. A mericans of an earlier day, despite their booster extravagances, recognized the di erence between the ideal and the practical, even as they clung desperately to, and sought to default upon, the responsibilities that went with achieving their democratic ideal.

Their outlook was pragmatic, their way with culture vernacular, an eclectic mixing of modes. Having rejected the hierarchal ordering of traditional societies, they improvised their culture as they did their politics and institutions—touch and go, by ear and by eye— tting new form to new function, new function to old form. Deep down they sensed that in the process of nation-building their *culture,* like their institutions, was always

more “American” (that futuristic concept) than they could perceive—or even fully accept—it to be.

Even the slaves, although thrust below the threshold of social hierarchy, were given a prominent place in our national iconography; their music, poetic imagery and choreography were grudgingly recognized as seminal sources of American art. In the process of creating (and recreating or diverting) themselves, the melting-pot Americans brazenly violated their ideals. They kept slaves or battened on the products of slave labor. They exploited and abused those who arrived later than themselves, kinsmen and aliens alike. While paying lip service to their vaunted forms of

justice, they betrayed, brutalized and scapegoated one another in the name of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Ten Commandments. But because of their delity to their parents’

customs and their respect for the pieties of their traditions, if not for those of their fellows, none of the groups that made up the total culture ever really desired to lose its sense of its unique past, not even when that past lay clouded in slavery.

Instead, they wished to use the techniques, ways of life, and values developed within their respective backgrounds as sources of morale in that continuing process of antagonistic cooperation, and of adjusting the past to the present in the interest of the future, which was so necessary in building what they imagined as a more humane society. Indeed, during their most candid, self-accepting moments they saw themselves as living embodiments of the ancestral past, people who had seized the democracy-sponsored opportunity to have a second chance. As such, they saw themselves as the best guarantee that whatever was most desirable and salvageable from that past would be retained and brought to ower, free of hierarchal hindrances. The little man behind the stove would know from his own condition that the melting-pot concept was a conceit, but his forced awareness of American cultural pluralism would assure him that it was by no means the product of a con game contrived by the powerful. Here not even the powerful were so perceptive.

So our current disavowals are not only misdirected; they are productive of more social disorder, more crises of cultural and personal identity than they could possibly resolve. It is here, on the level of culture, that the diverse elements of our various backgrounds, our heterogeneous pasts, have indeed come together,

"melted" and undergone metamorphosis. It is here, if we would but recognize it, that elements of the many available tastes, traditions, ways of life, and values that make up the total culture have been ceaselessly appropriated and made their own—consciously, unselfconsciously, or imperialistically—by groups and individuals to whose own backgrounds and traditions they are historically alien.

Indeed, it was through this process of cultural appropriation (and

misappropriation) that Englishmen, Europeans, Africans, and Asians *became* Americans.

The Pilgrims began by appropriating the agricultural, military, and meteorological lore of the Indians, including much of their terminology. The Africans, thrown together from numerous ravaged tribes, took up the English language and the biblical legends of the ancient Hebrews and were "Americanizing" themselves long before the American Revolution. They also had imposed upon them a goodly portion of European chromosomes, and thereby "inherited"

both an immunity to certain European diseases and a complexity of bloodlines and physical characteristics that have much to do with the white American's reluctance to di erentiate between race and culture, African and American, and are a major source of our general confusion over American identity. One of the many questions posed by the man on Riverside Drive is how one so

"white" could be simply "black" without being impossibly simpleminded. Especially when his skin and facial bone structure ask, "Where went the blood of yesteryear?" There is no point in answering the question as did Villon, because the man's face was as Anglo and his hairstyle as Afro as his car's radiator and body were English and German.

Everyone played the appropriation game. The whites took over any elements of Afro-American culture that seemed useful: the imagery of folklore, ways of speaking, endurance of what appeared to be hopeless hardship, and singing and dancing—including the combination of Afro-American art forms that produced the rst musical theater of national appeal: the minstrel show. And in improvising their rather tawdry and opportunistic version of a national mythology, the moviemakers—Christian and Jewish, Northerners and Southerners—ransacked and distorted for their own purposes the backgrounds and images of everyone, including the American Indians.

So, melting-pot disclaimers notwithstanding, Americans seem to have sensed intuitively that the possibility of enriching the individual self by such pragmatic and opportunitistic appropriations has constituted one of the most precious of their many freedoms.

Having opted for the new, and being unable to create it out of thin air or from words inscribed on documents of state, they did what came naturally: they pressured the elements of the past and present into new amalgams. In lieu of a usable cultural tradition, there were always the cultural improvisations of the Afro-Americans, the immigrants, or design-gifted religious groups like the Shakers—all so close to eye and ear, hand and imagination. Considering that the newness achieved by Americans has often been a matter of adapting to function and a matter of naming, of designation, we are reminded of how greatly the “Americanness” of American culture has been a matter of Adamic wordplay—of trying, in the interest of a futuristic dream, to impose unity upon an experience that changes too rapidly for linguistic or political exactitude. In this e ort we are often less interested in what we are than in projecting what we will be. But in our freewheeling appropriations of culture we appear to act on the assumption that as members of a “nation of nations,” we are, by de nition and by the processes of democratic cultural integration, the inheritors, creators and creations of a culture of cultures.

So perhaps the complex actuality of our cultural pluralism is perplexing because the diverse interacting elements that surround us, traditional and vernacular, not only elude accepted formulations, but take on a character

that is something other than their various parts. Our old familiar pasts become, in juxtaposition with elements appropriated from other backgrounds, incongruously transformed, exerting an energy (or synergy) of a di erent order than that generated by their separate parts—and this with incalculable results.

Nor should we forget the role played by objects and technology in the integration of our cultural styles, and in the regional and political uni cation of the nation. If we put the blues, bluegrass music, English folk songs, et cetera, together with Afro-American rhythms and gospel shouts, we have, God help us, rst rock and now "funk," that most odoriferous of musical(?) styles. Still, such mixtures of cultural elements are capable of igniting exciting transformations of culture. Even more mysteriously (and here, perhaps, we have a further source of the little man of Chehaw

Station's rich sensibility), they provide for exciting and most unexpected metamorphoses within the self-creating personality.

Frankly, many of the foregoing speculations have been arrived at over the years since I left Tuskegee. If I had been more mature or perceptive back when I rst heard of the little man behind the stove, an object that lay atop Miss Harrison's piano would have been most enlightening. It was a signed Proko ev manuscript that had been presented to her by the composer. Except for the signature, it looked like countless other manuscripts. Yet I suspect that to anyone who possessed a conventional notion of cultural and hierarchal order, its presence in such a setting would have been as incongruous as a Gutenberg Bible on the altar of a black sharecropper's church or a dashiki worn with a homburg hat. Still, there it was, an artifact of contemporary music, a folio whose signs and symbols resonated in that setting with the intricate harmonies of friendship, admiration and shared ideals through which it had found its way from Berlin to Tuskegee. Once there, and the arrangement of society beyond the campus notwithstanding, it spoke eloquently of the unstructured possibilities of culture in this pluralistic democracy. Yet despite its meticulous artistic form, in certain conventional minds its presence could arouse intimations of the irrational—of cultural, if not social, chaos.

Given the logic of a society ordered along racial lines, Miss Harrison's studio (or even the library) was simply o limits for such an artifact, certainly in its original form. But there it was, lying in wait to play havoc with conventional ideas of order, lending a wry reality to Malraux's observation that art is an assault upon logic.

Through its presence, the manuscript had become an agency of cultural transformation and synthesis. By charging Miss Harrison's basement studio with the spirit of living personages, ideals and purposes from afar, it had transformed that modest room from a mere spot on a segregated Negro campus into an advanced outpost on the frontiers of contemporary music, thus adding an unexpected, if undetected, dimension to Alabama's cultural atmosphere. In my innocence I viewed the manuscript as a property of Miss Harrison's, a sign of her connection with gifted artists across the ocean. It spoke

to me of possibility. But that it also endowed the scene—place, studio, campus—with a complex cultural ambiguity escaped my conscious mind. Though aware of certain details of the total scene, I was unattuned to the context in which they sounded, the cultural unity-within-diversity that the combination of details made manifest. Perhaps we are able to see only that which we are prepared to see, and in our culture the cost of insight is an uncertainty that threatens our already unstable sense of order and requires a constant questioning of accepted assumptions.

Had I questioned Miss Harrison as to how the racial identity of her little Chehaw man squared with the culture she credited to him, she might well have replied:

"Look, baby, the society beyond this campus is constantly trying to confuse you about the relationship between culture and race.

Well, if you ask me, artistic talent might have something to do with race, but you do *not* inherit culture and artistic skill through your genes. No, sir. These come as a result of personal conquest, of the individual's applying himself to that art, that music—whether jazz, classical, or folk—which helps him to realize and complete himself.

And that's true *wherever* the music or art of his choice originates."

Or in the words of André Malraux (whom I was to discover a year or two later), she might have told me that music is important as an artistic form of symbolic action "because its function is to let men escape from their human condition, not by means of an evasion, but through a possession, [for] art is a way of possessing destiny." And that therefore, even at racially segregated Tuskegee (as witnessed by, among countless other details, the library and Miss Harrison's Proko ev manuscript), one's "cultural heritage is the totality, not of works that men must respect [or that are used to enhance the mysti cations that support an elite], but those that can help them live." Entering into a dialogue with Malraux, she might have added on a more speci cally American note: "Yes, and most important, you must remember that in this country things are always all shook up, so that people are constantly moving around and rubbing o on one another culturally. Nor should you forget that here all things—

institutions, individuals and roles—o er more than the function

assigned them, because beyond their intended function they provide forms of education and criticism. They challenge, they ask questions, they o er suggestive answers to those who would pause and probe their mystery. Most of all, remember that it is not only the images of art or the sound of music that pass through walls to give pleasure and inspiration; it is in the very *spirit* of art to be de ant of categories and obstacles. They are, as transcendent forms of symbolic expression, agencies of human freedom."

• • •

Three years later, having abandoned my hope of becoming a musician, I had just about forgotten Miss Harrison's mythical little man behind the stove. Then, in faraway New York, concrete evidence of his actual existence arose and blasted me like the heat from an internally combusted ton of coal.

As a member of the Federal Writers' Project, I was spending a clammy late-fall afternoon of freedom circulating a petition in support of some now long-forgotten social issue that I regarded as indispensable to the public

good. I found myself inside a tenement building in San Juan Hill, a Negro district that disappeared with the coming of Lincoln Center. Starting on the top oor of the building, I had collected an acceptable number of signatures, and having descended from the ground oor to the basement level, was moving along the dimly lit hallway toward a door through which I could hear loud voices. They were male Afro-American voices, raised in violent argument. The language was profane, the style of speech a Southern idiomatic vernacular such as was spoken by formally uneducated Afro-American workingmen. Reaching the door, I paused, sounding out the lay of the land before knocking to present my petition.

But my delay led to indecision. Not, however, because of the loud, unmistakable anger sounding within; being myself a slum dweller, I knew that voices in slums are often raised in anger, but that the *rhetoric* of anger, itself cathartic, is not necessarily a prelude to physical violence. Rather, it is frequently a form of symbolic action,

a verbal equivalent of sticu s. No, I hesitated because I realized that behind the door a mystery was unfolding. A mystery so incongruous, outrageous, and surreal that it struck me as a threat to my sense of rational order. It was as though a bizarre practical joke had been staged and its perpetrators were waiting for me, its designated but unknowing scapegoat, to arrive: a joke designed to assault my knowledge of American culture and its hierarchal dispersal. At the very least, it appeared that my pride in my knowledge of my own people was under attack.

For the angry voices behind the door were proclaiming an intimate familiarity with a subject of which, by all the logic of their linguistically projected social status, they should have been oblivious. The subject of their contention confounded all my assumptions regarding the correlation between educational levels, class, race and the possession of conscious culture. Impossible as it seemed, these foul-mouthed black workingmen were locked in verbal combat over which of two celebrated Metropolitan Opera divas was the superior soprano!

I myself attended the opera only when I could raise the funds, and I knew full well that opera-going was far from the usual cultural pursuit of men identi ed with the linguistic style of such voices. Yet, confounding such

facile logic, they were voicing (and loudly) a familiarity with the Met far greater than my own. In their graphic, irreverent, and vehement criticism they were describing not only the two sopranos' acting abilities, but were ridiculing the gestures with which each gave animation to her roles, and they shouted strong opinions as to the ranges of the divas' vocal equipment. Thus, with such a distortion of perspective being imposed upon me, I was challenged either to solve the mystery of their knowledge by entering into their midst or to leave the building with my sense of logic reduced forever to a level of college-trained absurdity.

So challenged, I knocked. I knocked out of curiosity, I knocked out of outrage. I knocked in fear and trembling. I knocked in anticipation of whatever insights—malicious or transcendent, I no longer cared which—I would discover beyond the door.

For a moment there was an abrupt and portentous silence; then came the sound of chair legs thumping dully upon the oor, followed by further silence. I knocked again, loudly, with an authority red by an impatient and anxious urgency.

Again silence, until a gravel voice boomed an annoyed "Come in!"

Opening the door with an unsteady hand, I looked inside, and was even less prepared for the scene that met my eyes than for the content of their loudmouthed contention.

In a small, rank-smelling, lamplit room, four huge black men sat sprawled around a circular dining-room table, looking toward me with undisguised hostility. The sooty-chimneyed lamp glowed in the center of the bare oak table, casting its yellow light upon four water tumblers and a half-empty pint of whiskey. As the men straightened in their chairs I became aware of a replace with a coal re glowing in its grate, and leaning against the ornate marble facing of its mantelpiece, I saw four enormous coal scoops.

"All right," one of the men said, rising to his feet. "What the hell can we do for *you?"*

“And we ain’t buying nothing, buddy,” one of the seated men added, his palm slapping the table.

Closing the door, I moved forward, holding my petition like a ag of truce before me, noting that the men wore faded blue overalls and jumper jackets, and becoming aware that while all were of dark complexion, their blackness was accentuated in the dim lamplight by the dust and grime of their profession.

“Come on, man, speak up,” the man who had arisen said. “We ain’t got all day.”

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” I said, “but I thought you might be interested in supporting my petition,” and began hurriedly to explain.

“Say,” one of the men said, “you look like one of them relief investigators. You’re not out to jive us, are you?”

“Oh, no, sir,” I said. “I happen to work on the Writers’ Project …”

The standing man leaned toward me. “You on the Writers’

Project?” he said, looking me up and down.

“That’s right,” I said. “I’m a writer.”

“Now is that right?” he said. “How long you been writing?”

I hesitated. “About a year,” I said.

He grinned, looking at the others. “Y’all hear that? OP Home-boy here has done up and jumped on the *gravy* train! Now that’s pretty good. Pretty damn good! So what did you do before that?” he said.

“I studied music,” I said, “at Tuskegee.”

“Hey, now!” the standing man said. “They got a damn good choir down there. Y’all remember back when they opened Radio City?

They had that fellow William L. Dawson for a director. Son, let's see that paper."

Relieved, I handed him the petition, watching him stretch it between his hardened hands. After a moment of soundlessly mouthing the words of its appeal, he gave me a skeptical look and turned to the others.

"What the hell," he said, "signing this piece of paper won't do no good, but since Home here's a musician, it won't do us no harm to help him out. Let's go along with him."

Fishing a blunt-pointed pencil from the bib of his overalls, he wrote his name and passed the petition to his friends, who followed suit.

This took some time, and as I watched the petition move from hand to hand, I could barely contain myself or control my need to unravel the mystery that had now become far more important than just getting their signatures on my petition.

"There you go," the last one said, extending the petition toward me. "Having our names on there don't mean a thing, but you got

'em."

"Thank you," I said. "Thank you very much."

They watched me with amused eyes, expecting me to leave, but, clearing my throat nervously, I stood in my tracks, too intrigued to leave and suddenly too embarrassed to ask my question.

"So what're you waiting for?" one of them said. "You got what you came for. What else do you want?"

And then I blurted it out. "I'd like to ask you just one question," I said.

"Like what?" the standing one said.

"Like where on earth did you gentlemen learn so much about grand opera?"

For a moment he stared at me with parted lips; then, pounding the mantelpiece with his palm, he collapsed with a roar of laughter.

As the laughter of the others erupted like a string of giant recrackers, I looked on with growing feelings of embarrassment and insult, trying to grasp the handle of what appeared to be an unfriendly joke. Finally, wiping coal-dust-stained tears from his cheeks, he interrupted his laughter long enough to initiate me into the mystery.

“Hell, son,” he laughed, “we learn it down at the Met, that’s where …”

“You learned it *where?”*

“At the Metropolitan Opera, just like I told you. Strip us fellows down and give us some costumes and we make about the nest damn bunch of Egyptians you ever seen. Hell, we been down there wearing leopard skins and carrying spears or waving things like palm leafs and ostrich-tail fans f *or years!”*

Now, purged by the revelation, and with Hazel Harrison’s voice echoing in my ears, it was my turn to roar with laughter. With a shock of recognition I joined them in appreciation of the hilarious American joke that centered on the incongruities of race, economic status and culture. My sense of order restored, my appreciation of the arcane ways of American cultural possibility was vastly extended. The men were products of both past *and* present; were both coal heavers *and* Met extras; were both workingmen *and* opera bu s. Seen in the clear, pluralistic, melting-pot light of American cultural possibility, there was no contradiction. The joke, the apparent contradiction, sprang from my attempting to see them by the light of social concepts that cast less illumination than an inert lump of coal. I was delighted, because during a moment when I least expected to encounter the little man behind the stove (Miss Harrison’s vernacular music critic, as it were), I had stumbled upon four such men. Not behind the stove, it is true, but even more wondrously, they had materialized at an even more unexpected location: at the depth of the American social hierarchy and, of all

possible hiding places, behind a coal pile. Where there's a melting pot there's smoke, and where there's smoke it is not simply optimistic to expect re, it's imperative to watch for the phoenix's vernacular, but transcendent, rising.

From *The American Scholar*, Winter 1977/78.

On Initiation Rites and Power: A Lecture at West Point I hardly know where to start. It should be with an apology, I suppose, because as I recall how annoyed I was that I had been assigned certain novels as a student, I nd it extremely ironic that now my own is being passed along to you, and that I'm responsible.

I suppose the best way to get into this is to just be autobiographical, since you are concerned with my novel, because the novel isn't autobiographical in an immediate sense, and it'll be necessary to enlarge upon what Colonel Capps had to say about my background in order to spell out to you just why, and in what way, it is *not* autobiographical. I was, as he said, a music major at Tuskegee, but I was also one who read a lot, who lived in books as well as in the sound of music. At Tuskegee I found myself reading *The Waste Land*, and for the rst time I was caught up in a piece of poetry which moved me but which I couldn't reduce to a logical system. I didn't know quite why it was working on me, but being close to the jazz experience—that is, the culture of jazz—I had a sense that some of the same sensibility was being expressed in poetry.

Now, the jazz musician, the jazz soloist, is anything if not eclectic.

He knows his rhythms; he knows the tradition of his form, so to speak, and he can draw upon an endless pattern of sounds which he recombines on the spur of the moment into a meaningful musical experience, if he's successful. I had a sense that all of these references of Eliot's, all of this snatching of phrases from the German, French, Sanskrit, and so on, were attuned to that type of American cultural expressiveness which one got in jazz and which one still gets in good jazz. But between feeling intuitively that this was what was going on and being able to con rm it, there was quite a gap. Fortunately Mr. Eliot appended to the original edition of *The Waste Land* a long body of footnotes, and I began to get the books

out of the library and read them. That really was a beginning of my literary education, and actually it was the beginning of my transformation (or shall we say, metamorphosis) from a would-be composer into some sort of novelist.

The thing about reading these footnotes, and about reading criticism generally, was that they made me as conscious of the elements and traditions which went into the creation of literature as I had long been taught to be conscious of the various elements which went into musical styles and traditions. One had to be conscious; there was no question about this. And for me there was another powerful motive for being conscious, and that was because I came out of my particular Southwestern background (as an Oklahoma native), with parents who were from Georgia and South Carolina, and my racial background, which naturally at that moment seemed to separate me from the conscious intentions of American literature. Because in far too many instances, I seemed to appear, or my *people* seemed to appear, only in the less meaningful writing. I felt that I would have to make some sort of closer identi cation with the tradition of American literature, if only by way of nding out why I was *not* there—or better, by way of nding how I could use that very powerful literary tradition by way of making literature my own, and by way of using literature as a means of clarifying the peculiar and particular experience out of which I came.

Well, to jump ahead. During the war, I was a sea cook in the Merchant Marine. During the winter of 1944, I had received a fellowship from the Rosenwald Foundation in order to write a novel.

It was about $1,500, as I recall, and I had an interesting story to tell.

Some of my friends were in the Air Force. That is, friends from college, friends from Tuskegee, had become pilots, combat pilots, and so on, and during that moment of the war, they were very active. But preceding that activity, there had been a lot of political agitation on the part of Negro Americans because we were not being allowed to ght, and those young men, those friends of mine, those pilots, were being withheld from duty, and that concerned me very much. So I thought that my rst novel would have such a plot as

this (you can see that I was very naïve at the time), and I set my story in Nazi Germany in a prisoner-of-war camp. (This is where it becomes complicated.) The ranking o cer of the camp was to have been a black pilot who had beneath him in rank a whole slew of white pilots. The devil of the piece was to have been a Machiavellian Nazi prison-camp o cial who spent his time pitting the black American against the white Americans. I was trying to write this, by the way, as our ship traveled in convoys of some eighty ships and attops, and so on, taking supplies over during what was actually the Battle of the Bulge. Well, we got into Le Havre during the night, and it was so "hot" around there that that novel went up in sweat, and it's very good that it did.

However, one good e ect of that experience was that I not only forgot the novel, but I experienced such tension under these conditions of combat that when I got back to stateside the physicians told me that I should take a rest. I took that rest by going up to Waits-eld, Vermont, where a friend had an old farmhouse on which a few years before I'd helped make some repairs. While there, I tried to write, not knowing quite what I would write but quite aware that my original idea would not work. One afternoon I wrote some words while sitting in an old barn looking out on the mountain, and these words were "I am an invisible man." I didn't know quite what they meant, and I didn't know where the idea came from, but the moment I started to abandon them, I thought:

"Well, maybe I should try to discover exactly what it was that lay behind the statement. What type of man would make that type of statement, would conceive of himself in such terms? What lay behind him?" After that, it was a process of trying to make a meaningful story out of what seemed to be a rather wild notion.

Now, having said that, let me say something else. By this time I was very much aware of the elements which went into ction. I wanted to tell a story. I felt that there was a great deal about the nature of American experience which was not understood by most Americans. I felt also that the diversity of the total experience rendered much of it mysterious. And I felt that because so much of it which appeared unrelated was actually most intimately

intertwined, it needed exploring. In fact, I believed that unless we continually explored the network of complex relationships which bind us together, we would continue being the victims of various inadequate conceptions of ourselves, both as individuals and as citizens of a nation of diverse peoples.

For after all, American diversity is not simply a matter of race, region or religion. It is a product of the complex of intermixing of all these categories. For even our racial experience is diverse within itself, and rendered more complex by the special relationships existing between my own group and the various regions in which Negro Americans nd their existence—and by reason of the varied relationships shared by blacks and whites of various social backgrounds. These, in turn, are shaped by the politics, social history, and climatic conditions existing within the country's various political and geographical regions. Nor is this all, for there is also the abiding condition of mystery generated by the diversity of cultural and political experience within the Negro American group itself. For despite the overall unity of black experience in the United States, the experience of Southern blacks di ers in certain important aspects, both cultural and political, from that of Northern blacks; that of Southwestern blacks di ers from that of *Southeastern* blacks, while the experience of those who grew up in Nevada, California, and Washington State di ers in many ways from all of these, if only for having developed during a later period of historical time. Such factors make for important variations in experience, and make necessary the exercise of conscious thought even on the part of those black Americans who would "know the Negro." So that was one part of it.

The other part of it was the fact that I was reading certain books. I was reading Lord Raglan's *The Hero*, which has to do with tradition, myth and drama. As you will recall, Lord Raglan was concerned with the manner in which myth became involved with the histories of living persons, became incorporated into their personal legends. I seem to recall that he noted about twenty-two aspects of character and experience that were attributed to most heroes, and he discovered that historical gures— gures from religion, military

heroes, and so on—all tended to embody clusterings of these same mythological aspects, and this whether they were gures of fact or fantasy. Thus it would seem that the human imagination nds it necessary to take exemplary people—charismatic personalities, cultural heroes—and enlarge upon them. The mythmaking tendency of the human imagination enlarges such gures by adding to their speci c histories and characters accomplishments and characteristics attributed to heroes in the past. So that it isn't unusual in the mythology of mankind to nd gures said to have been conceived (that's the proper term, any way you see it) through virgins. Nor is it unusual to nd leaders who were exposed to death as infants only to have their lives saved by humble people, and who then through various accidents attending the mysterious process of life, and through their own heroic assertions in the drama of social intercourse, became great leaders. According to various accounts, a number of them married their mothers and killed their fathers, but if that still happens today, we no longer talk about it.

Anyway, I was concerned with such ndings of Lord Raglan's as a literary matter, but at the same time I was concerned with the nature of leadership, and thus with the nature of the hero, precisely because during the historical moment when I was working out the concept of *Invisible Man* my people were involved in a terri c quarrel with the federal government over our not being allowed to participate in the war as combat personnel in the armed forces on an equal basis, and because we were not even being allowed to work in the war industries on an equal basis with other Americans.

This quarrel led to my concern with the nature of Negro leadership, from a di erent and nonliterary direction. I was very much involved with the question of just why our Negro leadership was never able to enforce its will. Just what was there about the structure of American society that prevented Negroes from throwing up e ective leaders? Thus it was no accident that the young man in my book turned out to be hungry and thirsty to prove to himself that he could be an e ective leader.

On the other hand, as I began working seriously on the novel, I had to become aware of something else. I had to learn that in such a

large and diverse country, with such a complex social structure, a writer was called upon to conceive some sort of model which would represent that

great diversity, to account for all these people and for the various types of social manners found within various levels of the social hierarchy, a structure of symbolic actions which could depict the various relationships between groups and classes of people. He was called upon to conceive some way of getting that complexity into his work in the form of symbolic action and metaphor. In other words, I discovered, for myself at least, that it was necessary to work out some imaginative integration of the total American experience and discover through the work of the imagination some way of moving a young black boy from a particular area and level of the society as close as he could be

"realistically" moved to sources of political power. This was not only necessary in order to structure a meaningful story, but also necessary if I were to relate myself to certain important and abiding themes which were present—or which I *thought* were present—in the best of American literature.

So now I was working in the exalted form of the novel, or trying to work in that literary form, and as I read back in American literature and tried very seriously to identify myself with the concerns of the classical American novelists, it began to seem to me that American ction had played a special role in the development of the American nation. It had had to play that role, had had to concern itself with certain uniquely American tasks even in those instances in which it was not read (or not widely read, and I think here of *Moby-Dick).* This was for a number of reasons. One, as a literary form the novel has been primarily concerned with charting changes within society and with changes in personality as a ected by society. Two, the novel developed during a period which marked the breakup of traditional societies, of kingship, and so on, and by the 1850s, the great masters of the nineteenth century had fashioned it into a most sensitive and brilliant form for revealing new possibilities of human freedom, for depicting the e ects of new technologies upon personality, and for charting the e ects wrought by new horizons of expectation upon the total society.

Of course this type of change (and its consequences) has been an enduring part of the American experience, and it has always concerned our great American novelists. But even if we concern ourselves with those American

writers who were *not* novelists, we see that the makers of American literature were also concerned with spelling out that which was peculiarly *American* about the American experience—this, because we did not start here. We started in Europe. We made a formulation here of what we were and who we were, and what we expected to be, and we wrote it down in the documents of the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence. I mean that we put ourselves on the books as to what we were and would become, and we were stuck with it. And we were stuck with it partially through a process of dei cation which came through the spilling of blood and through the sacri ces which were endured by those people who set up this great institution here on this particular point of the Hudson River.

By the 1830s, or the late 1820s, several things were being demanded. One, that we have a literature which would be speci cally American, which would tell us who we were and how we varied, and how we had grown, and where we were going—and most importantly, how the ideals for which we had sacri ced so many young men were being made manifest within the society.

There's no point in spelling this out too much. I think the very walls around here speak to you about such matters. But for novelists, for poets, for men of literature, something else obtains. You nd that American artists are stuck with two major problems which come upon them through the very tradition itself, through the very history of this society. One is the necessity of being conscious of how one section of the country di ers from the others, of how one section of the society di ers from the others. And, two, we have upon our shoulders the burden of conscientiousness. I think in your motto you say "duty," a sense of duty, a sense of responsibility, for the health of the society. You might not like the society; invariably we Americans (as Henry James pointed out, and as others have pointed out) have an ongoing quarrel with our lives, with the condition that we live in. At our best moments we have a quarrel with how we

treat or fail to treat and extend the better part, the better aspects, the better values, the good things of the society, to all levels of the society.

So I found, as I worked with my little book—trying to build my ction, trying to structure my "lie" in such a way as would reveal a certain amount of truth—that I, too, had to be aware of how we were faring and where we were going. I realized, ghting for a certain orientation (as a Negro writer who was taking on the burden of the American literary tradition), that I would have to master, or at least make myself familiar with, the major motives of American literature, *even when written by people who philosophically would reject me as a member of the American community*. How would I do that without being, in my own eyes, something of a slave, something less than a man?

It occurred to me that what some of my "teachers" were calling

"white literature" was not really *white* at all. Because as I began to grasp the background of the American experience in literature, I began to realize that even before we were a nation, people of African background had been in uencing the nature of the American language, that amalgam of English English, of French and German and Dutch and American Indian dialects, and so on. All of this, long before we were a nation, had already begun to form; American culture began to evolve before we were a nation. And some of the people contributing to it were my own people. This was very necessary for my sense of morale and for my sense of the complexity of the society, or at least of the *culture* of the society, because there's no doubt that we were slaves; both of my grandparents on both sides were slaves. (It hasn't been that long ago.) Nevertheless, part of the music of the language, part of the folklore which informed our conscious American literature, came through the interaction of the slave and the white man, and particularly so in the South. Mr. Faulkner, who has lectured here, had no doubt about that, and some of our most meaningful insights into the experience of the South have come through his understanding of that complex relationship. And because he did

understand, he has been responsible for some of the real glories of our literature.

But here again I had to nd out where *I* stood. In reading, I came across Whitman, who was writing very early (I think 1848 or so), nding in the American Negro dialect—the dialect of the slaves, as he put it—the

possibility of an American grand opera, the possibility of a new music in speech. Of course this possibility was there. As I looked around the South, and as I looked around New York, and as I noticed the white crewmen on my ships at sea, I began to say,

“Well, now, something here that you are saying, a certain rhythm in your speech, I rst heard in my particular community. A certain way that you swing your shoulders, or your legs when you walk (especially Southern boys), you’ve gotten a lot of that from us.”

Maybe we got it from them, too. The point, of course, was to be relieved of the burden of interpreting all of life and its works in racial terms. Therefore, for me personally it was a matter of saying,

“I am going to learn how to write a novel; I will not ignore the racial dimensions at all, but I will try to put them into a human perspective.”

So my little book starts out by taking a young man who has an in nite capacity for making mistakes (and being a fool, I think), and who—in his *passion* for leadership, in his *passion* to prove himself within the limitations of a segregated society—blunders from one point to another until he nally realizes that American society cannot de ne the role of the individual, or at least not that of the *responsible* individual. For it is our fate as Americans to achieve that sense of selfconsciousness through our own e orts.

The story itself, after all this pretentious-sounding talk, was a rather simple story: about how a young man grew up, and about the conditions which it was necessary for him to confront as he grew up. Because our society was divided, at that time, into one region which was primarily agricultural, and another which was primarily industrial (or more dominated by technological considerations than by the seasons), the narrator of the story goes through a number of rites of passage, rites of initiation. And as I tried to tell my story, I began looking at the meaning of certain rituals. No one had ever

told me that the “battle royal” was a rite, but I came to see that it was. It was a rite which could be used to project certain racial divisions into the society and reinforce the idea of white racial superiority. On the other hand,

as a literary person trying to make up stories out of recognizable experience, and as one who was reading a lot about myth and the function of myth and ritual in literature, it was necessary that I see the “battle royal” situation as something more than a group of white men having sadistic fun with a group of Negro boys. Indeed, I would have to see it for what it was beyond the question of the racial identities of the actors involved: a ritual through which important social values were projected and reinforced.

To use it artistically, I would have to step away from it a bit so that I could see it even more objectively and identify it as one of those rites of initiation called “fool’s errands.” When I played hooky for the rst time and went to water the elephants of the Ringling Brothers Circus in Oklahoma City, I was sent on such an errand. The circus workers told me to go to a certain man and bring back the

“tent wrench.” Well, after I had exhausted myself traveling around the circus grounds I learned that there was no such thing as a “tent wrench.” But I also discovered that this practical joke was not necessarily a racial device, because I observed it being used on other people as well. In hotels new workers (“squares”) are also sent on such errands. In fact, many of the rites of passage, those rituals of growing up, found in our society are in the form of such comic, practical-joking a airs which we ignore in the belief that they possess no deeper signi cance. Yet it is precisely in their being regarded as unimportant that they take on importance. For in them we ritualize and dramatize attitudes which contradict and often embarrass the sacred values which we proclaim through our solemn ceremonies and rituals of nationhood.

Because while great institutions glamorize themselves through rituals, Americans tend to require supplementary rites that are more modest, more down-to-earth, and often it is these which serve to give dramatic form to our warmest emotions.

But in our democratic society, which is relatively unstructured as societies go (and unstructured precisely because we had to play it by ear as we got it going), such patterns are not widely recognized for what they are, or at least they are not codi ed, and thus are not institutionalized. Primitive societies are much more e cient and consistent; they are much more concerned with

guiding the young through each stage of their social development, while we leave much of this to chance, perhaps as part of the responsibility of freedom. Today we are having great trouble with young people of educated, sheltered and nancially well-heeled backgrounds who despite their social advantages have not been taught that they shouldn't play with heroin. I suppose that in a tightly structured and well-run society we would develop a special rite of initiation for dealing with the availability of drugs. Or at least we would teach such individuals how to take heroin without destroying themselves.

Now that, of course, is a joke, meant to demonstrate that it is indeed possible to make comedy of such serious matters.

But not only have we failed to provide rites of passage adequate to the wide variety and broad freedom of experience available to the young, we also have failed to nd ways of keeping up with much of what happens in our society. Therefore one of the things I wanted to do was to provide the reader with—or discover for myself—some sense of how *ideas* moved from one level of society to another. This was important for me to understand because, after all, when I was at Tuskegee, I couldn't go to a theater without being discriminated against, and in Birmingham, I couldn't move around the streets without worrying about Bull Conner (oh yes, Bull Conner was there even then); yet under such conditions of social deprivation, I was reading T. S. Eliot. I was concerned with the nature of power; I was trying to nd a way of relating myself to the major concerns of our society.

So I felt that if we had a real sociology of ideas in this country, we would have a means of judging the impact of ideas as they came to rest within the diverse groups which make up American society. We would have a way of predicting, of saying, "Well, now, out there in such and such a section there are persons whose background,

experience and temperament have made them receptive to certain notions, concepts and ideas. Therefore we can expect one or two such people to go about making something out of them, or at least making a try." But our failure to deal with the mystery of our diversity makes such generalized predictions impossible. Relying upon race, class and religion as guides, we underestimate the impact of ideas and the power of lifestyles and fashion to

upset custom and tradition. Some of our intellectuals even forget that Negroes are not just in uenced by ideas that are within the public domain, and that such is the nature of freedom in our democracy that even shoeshine boys may criticize the lifestyles and tastes of great entrepreneurs, which shoeshine boys are given to doing, and that they can also go to the library and read books which entrepreneurs *should* be reading but usually don't. So that our failure to grasp the mysterious possibilities generated by our unity within diversity and our freedom within unfreedom can lead to great confusion. It also leads to the loss of potential talent, just as our failure to recognize the social implications of cultural developments taking place on the lower levels of the social hierarchy can lead to social confrontations which can rock society to its very summit.

But however we choose to look at it, there exist pressures which compel the individual American (and the individual black American) to respond to the intellectual, emotional, political currents and pressures which a ect the entire society—just as the stock market or fads in clothing or automobiles a ect the lives of sharecroppers, whether or not the sharecropper knows that the stock market exists. Thus I tried as best I could to weave a tale which would at least be cognizant of these many interconnecting possibilities of relationships.

About the story, there is little I can say, unless you ask me questions. Because I haven't read it in a good while and I don't think I'll ever read it again in its entirety. It was too di cult for me to get rid of, and not because I didn't write fast and wasn't inventive. But there was something else. There was a sense of isolation, a feeling that for all my concern to make it so, it couldn't possibly have much value to others. I thought that I would be lucky if I sold between

ve hundred and a thousand copies. I was very much concerned with the link between the scenes and the actions—that is, the problem of continuity—because I realized even then that it was not enough for me simply to be angry, or simply to present horrendous events or ironic events. I would have to do what every novelist does: tell my tale and make it believable, at least for as long as it engaged the attention of the reader. I could not violate the reader's sense of reality, his sense of the way things were done, at least on

the surface. My task would be to give him the surface and then try to take him into the internalities, take him below the level of racial structuring and down into those areas where we are simply men and women, human beings living on this blue orb, and not always living so well. This is what I tried to do.

The rest became a confrontation with technical problems: How do you "tell" it, how do you put it together? How do you foreshadow events, how do you handle irony? How do you fabricate that artifact which we call a novel? How, in other words, do you tell a story that will not embarrass the great literature which has gone before you?

How do you join the club? How do you justify the assertion of arrogance that is necessary to a man who would take a society which everyone "knows" and abstract certain of its elements in an e ort to reduce it to a symbolic form which will simultaneously involve the reader's sense of life while giving expression to his, the writer's, own most deeply held values? I refer to the arrogance of the artist, and a very necessary arrogance it is. For I think it is one reason why the novel is important. I think its presence aids the novelist in attacking the enormity of his task, which is that of reducing a society, through the agency of mere words, to manageable proportions—to proportions which will re ect *one* man's vision, *one* man's sense of the human condition, and in such volatile and eloquent ways that each rhythm, each nuance of character and mood, indeed each punctuation mark, becomes expressive of *his* sense of life and, by extension, that of the reader.

Related to this is a discovery which I think most American writers must make before they are through: it is that each writer has a triple responsibility: to himself, to his immediate group, and to his region.

He must convey each of these aspects of his own experience as he knows them. And he must convey them not only in such a manner that members of his own particular group can become aware of what has been happening in the ux and ow, the thunder and lightning of daily living, but in such a way that individuals belonging to groups and regions of the society other than his own can have his report on what was happening in his particular area of the society, to his particular type of people, and at that particular point in time. All this so that readers may become more conscious of themselves

and more aware of the complex unity and diversity not only of Americans but of all human life. Here the movement is from the speci cally imagined individuals to the group, to the nation and, it is hoped, to the universal.

This becomes a function of creating and broadening our consciousness of American character, of creating and recreating the American experience. It is a serious function because it is our good-and-bad fortune that we Americans exist at our best only when we are conscious of who we are and where we are going. In this process our traditions and national ideals move and function like a rm ground bass, like the deep tones of your marvelous organ there in the chapel, repeating themselves continually while new melodies and obbligatos sound high above. In literature this is the process by which the values, ideals, assumptions and memories of unique individuals and groups reach out across the divisions wrought by our national diversity and touch us all. It is one of the important social functions of literature because our traditions and values must be constantly revivi ed; again and again they must be given further extension.

Having said all that, I'll now say this, and then I'm nished. My rst principal in grade school was a Professor Whittaker. He was a man of erect military bearing, although he must have been fairly old when I knew him. He had white hair, clear, piercing blue eyes, and a goatee. Professor Whittaker was a West Point man. Somehow he did not graduate; he must have been here during the Reconstruction. Nevertheless he was a marvelous man who managed to get something of West Point into those little Negro

grade and high schools in which he taught when I was growing up. I suppose I mention him because I never thought I would ever come to West Point. But I also mention him by way of suggesting that even here there are extensions and dimensions of which we are not aware and of which we *should* be aware. Because in these United States the crucial question is not one of having a perfect society, or even of having at any given moment a viable society. Rather, it is to keep struggling, to keep trying to reduce to consciousness all of the complex experience which ceaselessly unfolds within this great nation. Certainly that was all I was trying to do with my book, and if I managed even a little of that, then I think the e ort worthwhile.

I’m pleased to have been here, and if you have questions, I would be very pleased to answer them, or to try.

Mr. Ellison, I have a question about the whole point of the novel, the purpose of the novel: whether you considered it to be just about the Negro relationship with the white man, or, as your last statement indicates, perhaps to everyone. Part of the class thought it was merely the Negro-white man relationship, and then that perhaps toward the end as an afterthought you sort of put in the everyone idea, because it didn’t seem to tie in. And the other part of the class thought you tried to show the relationship between all minority groups and majority groups.

Yes, thank you. Well, I conceived of the novel as an account, on the speci c level, of a young Negro American’s experience. But I hoped at the same time to write so well that anyone who shared everything except his racial identity could identify with it, because there was never any question in my mind that Negroes were human, and thus being human, their experience became metaphors for the experiences of other people. I thought, further, that if literature has any general function within any society and throughout the world, it must serve at its best as a study in comparative humanity. The role of the writer, from that point of view, is to structure ction which will allow a universal identi cation, while at the same time

not violating the speci city of the particular experience and the particular character.

Mr. Ellison, concerning your novel, I’d like to know exactly to what extent some of the scenes in it happened to you.

Well, let’s put it this way, they all happened to me—in my head.

Now, remember that you’re dealing with the imagination and not with sociology. For instance, one summer when I was still in high school, I was looking for a job (and it gets to be 105 to 110 in the shade in Oklahoma City; it used to, anyway). I met a friend and he said, “If you go up to Broadway between Ninth and Tenth, there’s a car lot there, and the man wants someone to help him around the car lot.” He said, “I couldn’t take it because I got another job, but you better hurry up there.” So I turned on the

fan, as they say, and by the time I arrived, I was pretty moist. There was this white man sitting out under a tree; and I said, “Sir, I understand you need someone to work here”; and he said, “Yes, sit over here on this box.”

(He had a crate with a cushion on it.) He said, “Sit over here and tell me about yourself.” He began to ask me about my grades, about my parents, and so on, and I began to feel that I was getting the job.

Then, at the moment when I was most certain that the job was mine, I felt a charge of electricity in my tail, and I went up into the air and I came down.

The whole thing, again, was a ritual of initiation—a practical joke

—wherein a Ford coil, a coil from the old Model T Ford, had been hooked up to a battery. That was the whole point. Of course there was no job, but what my imagination has made of that is the scene in the battle royal where the boys struggle for money on the rug.

Am I giving away secrets, do you believe that? But that’s how the imagination worked and conjured up the scene.

Sir, your novel has been called “episodic,” with the theme of white domination over the Negro with the express purpose of keeping the Negro

in his primitive state; however, in your lecture here I’ve gotten a di erent idea, that it was merely a thematic representation of the American Negro and his drive to excel. The question I have is, was it your purpose to show this white domination over the Negro and of keeping the Negro in his primitive state, or was it merely to show in an episodic manner this drive to excel?

Certainly I didn’t start … Do you want to repeat that? The answer is No.

Mr. Ellison, would you consider yourself a pioneer in writing about the Negro relationship to white groups; if not, who else besides Eliot in uenced your writing?

Well, in the rst place, I don't think that it's a function of writing to tell the reader what it feels like to be a Negro, as critics say over and over again about plays and novels and poems by black writers. I think the function of literature, all literature that's worthy of the name, is to remind us of our common humanity and the cost of that humanity. This is the abiding theme of great literature, and all serious writers nd themselves drawn to spelling it out in all its detail and multiplicity. As for people who in uenced me, the rst two novels that I read when I arrived in New York were given to me by Langston Hughes (whom I had just met), who wanted me to deliver them to a friend of his, but he told me that I could keep them long enough to read them. Those two novels were André Malraux's *Man's Fate* and *The Days of Wrath*. I have certainly been in uenced by Dostoevsky. The rst words of *Invisible Man*, the rhythm of the Prologue, go right back to *Notes from Underground*. I have been in uenced by Malraux, by Melville, by Faulkner, by almost all of the good ones.

Sir, in your story it seems as if the narrator was struggling with disillusionment, and then toward the end of the story, when you cut it o , you don't explain simply whether he found himself or not. Was it

your intention to start the narrator o being disillusioned and follow him throughout this complete cycle to where he did nd himself, or were we simply supposed to draw our own conclusion?

Well, as I recall the book … the narrator managed to avoid a basic confrontation through most of the story, and when he nally makes that confrontation, he's freed. Part of his problem was not that of being dominated by white society. Part of his problem was a refusal to demand that people see him for what he wanted to be. Always he was accommodating. If you notice, he was being told who he was, he was given several names throughout the novel, and always he accepted them till the very last. As to the last part of your question, I would say that yes, he comes out of the ground, and this can be seen when you realize that although *Invisible Man* is *my* novel, it is really *his* memoir. I'm a little prejudiced here, because I do feel that books represent socially useful acts—so we can say that. I left it at this point because I assumed that by nally taking the

initial step of trying to sum up the meaning of his experience, he had moved to another stage of his development.

Mr. Ellison, the Brotherhood has the characteristics of a socialistic society; I was wondering what this had to do with the Communist tradition that in such an organization the depressed can nd a way out of their condition.

Here again is a fabrication, just as the machines in the paint factory are fabrications. They never existed. They're images there for certain literary reasons. I did not want to describe an existing Socialist or Communist or Marxist political group, primarily because it would have allowed the reader to escape confronting certain political patterns, patterns which still exist and of which our two major political parties are guilty in their relationships to Negro Americans. But what I wanted to do at the same time was to touch upon certain techniques of struggle, of political struggle, certain concepts of equality and political possibility which were very much present in our society. I think we have absorbed them into the larger parties in many ways.

I also wanted to draw upon the tinge of subversion which some of these parties tend to represent. So the Brotherhood was this, but at the same time, in the life of the narrator it was one more obstacle that he had to confront in order to arrive at some viable assessment of his own possibilities as a political leader. Remember, Tod Clifton is killed, and there's a funeral, an improvisation, an improvised funeral, that he (the narrator) leads, which polarizes feelings around what the narrator thought would have been to the Brotherhood's best interest. But they were no longer interested because they were not concerned basically with Negro freedom, but with e ecting their own ends. It was very important for this young man, this would-be leader, to understand that all political parties are basically concerned with power and with maintaining power, not with humanitarian issues in the raw and abstract state.

Mr. Ellison, could you tell us the signi cance of the scene near the end of Invisible Man *when the narrator falls down the open manhole? Two white men are chasing him, and after he falls in the manhole he tells them, "I still have you in this brief case."*

Well, I'll try. What I wanted him to be saying was that these men who were hurling racial epithets down at him were not aware that *their* fate was in this bag that he carried—this bag that he had hauled around with his various identi cations, his diploma, with Clifton's doll, with Tarp's slavery chainlink, and so on—and that this contained a very important part of their history and of their lives. I was also trying to say that you will have to become aware of the connection between what is in this bag (which is his fate, that is, the fate of the Negro narrator) and the racist whites who look upon him mainly as a bu oon and a victim.

Sir, there seem to be a few comparisons between your novel and Native Son *in that both protagonists seem to be ghting a losing cause through the entire novel, and the fact that they both have ties with the*

Communist party and confront white women. Was this by coincidence or were you in uenced by Mr. Wright as you wrote the novel?

I knew Mr. Wright from about the second day he arrived in New York in 1937; I guess it was June. I wrote my rst book review for him, a published book review, and I wrote my rst short story for a magazine which he was in New York to edit. It was a Harlem-based magazine, a literary magazine, and not a Communist organ. But he accepted my story, and then the magazine failed. But by 1940 I was not showing Mr. Wright any of my writing because by that time I understood that our sensibilities were quite di erent, and what I was hoping to achieve in ction was something quite di erent from what he wanted to achieve.

As to what you call Communism and the white women, I would say that anyone writing from the Negro American point of view with any sort of thoroughness would certainly have had to write about the potential meaning and e ects of the relationship between black women and white men and black men and white women, because this became an essence, and a great part of the society was controlled by the taboos built around the fear of the white woman and the black man getting together. Great political power and, to some extent, great military ardor were brewed from this socio-sexual polarization. Hence any novelist who is going to write from the Negro background would certainly have to deal with these particular aspects of our society. They're unpleasant, and yet it is in the unpleasant, in that which is

charged with emotion, with fears, with irrationality, that we nd great potential for transforming attitudes. So I tried to face them with a certain forthrightness, to treat them ironically, because they are really destructive in a kind of comic and absurd way—except when we consider the old rite of lynching. But you'll notice that I did not drag in that particular aspect of the sociology of interracial relationships.

Sir, was it your intention to include any protest in the novel?

Protest in the novel?

Yes, sir, would you call it a protest novel?

I would think that implicitly the novel protests. It protests the agonies of growing up. It protests the problem of trying to nd a way into a complex, intricately structured society in a way which would allow this particular man to behave in a manly way, and which would allow him to seize some instrumentalities of political power. That is where the protest is on one level. On another level, the protest lies in my trying to make a story out of these elements without falling into the clichés which have marked and marred most ction about American Negroes—that is, to write literature instead of political protest. Beyond this, I would say simply that in the very act of trying to create something, there is implicit a protest against the way things are, a protest against man's vulnerability before the larger forces of society and the universe. We make ction out of that kind of protest, which is similar to the kind of protest that is involved in your mastering your bodies; your mastering the physical, intellectual, military and legal disciplines which you are here for. All of this is a protest, a human protest against that which *is*, against the raw and unformed way that we come into the world. I don't think you have to demand any more protest than that. I think, on the other hand, if the novelist tells the truth, if he writes eloquently and depicts believable human beings and believable human situations, then he has done more than simply protest. I think that his task is to present the human, to make it eloquent, and to provide some sense of transcendence over the given—that is, to make his protest meaningful, signi cant and eloquent of human value.

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What These Children Are Like

I assume you all know that I really have no business attending this sort of conference. I have no technical terminology and no knowledge of an academic discipline. This isn't boasting, nor is it an apology; it is just a means of reminding myself of what my reality has been and of what I am. At this point it might be useful for us to ask ourselves a few questions: what is this act, what is this scene in which the action is taking place, what is this agency and what is its purpose?

The act is to discuss "these children," the di cult thirty percent.

We know this very well; it has been hammered out again and again.

But the matter of *scene* seems to get us into trouble.

The American scene is a diversi ed one, and the society which gives it its character is a pluralistic society—or at least it is supposed to be. Ideally it is, but we seem to insist, on the other hand, that this society is *not* pluralistic. We have been speaking as though it were *not* made up of diversi ed cultures but was in fact one monolithic culture. And one which is perfect, the best of all possible cultures, with the best of all people a rming its perfection.

Well, if this were true there would be no point in our being here.

But we are here, and since we are, let us try to see American society in all of its diversity. One of the things that has been left out in our discussion is imagination. But imagination exists even in the backwoods of Alabama, and here too is to be found a forthright attitude toward what it is possible to achieve and to become in this country.

The education which goes on outside the classroom, which goes on as they walk within the mixed environment of Alabama, teaches children that they should not reach out for certain things. Much of the education that I

received at Tuskegee (this isn't quite true of Oklahoma City) was an education *away* from the uses of the

imagination, *away* from the attitudes of aggression and courage.

This is not an attack. This is descriptive, this is autobiographic. You did not do certain things because you might be destroyed. You didn't do certain things because you were going to be frustrated.

There were things you didn't do because the world outside was not about to accommodate you.

But we're still talking about scene, and thus we're talking about environment. A discussion of scene in terms of culture and diversity serves to remind us that there is no absolutely segregated part of this country. There is no such thing as a culturally deprived kid.

That kid down in Alabama whose parents have no food, where the mill owner has dismantled the mills and moved out west and left them to forage in the garbage cans of Tuskegee, has nevertheless some awareness that he is part of a larger American scene, and he is being in uenced by this scene. But how *does* the uctuation of the stock market get down there to him? How does the electronic manipulation of music get into his musical language? How do the literary theories of the "Fugitives," which have so much prestige in the North, in uence his destiny? How is his badly trained teacher going to view him and his possibilities as a future American adult?

What I’m trying to say is that the problem seems to me to be one of really scrutinizing the goals of American education.

It does me no good to be told that I’m down on the bottom of the pile and that I have nothing with which to get out. I know better. It does me no good to be told that I have no heroes, that I have no respect for the father principle because my father is a drunk. I would simply say to you that there are good drunks and bad drunks.

The Eskimos have sixteen or more words to describe snow because they live with snow. I have about twenty-ve di erent words to describe Negroes because I live principally with Negroes. “Language is equipment for living,” to quote Kenneth Burke. One uses the language which helps to preserve one’s life, which helps to make one feel at peace in the world, and which screens out the greatest amount of chaos. *All* human beings do this.

When you have one body of people who have been sewn together by a common experience—I won’t even talk about the cultural

heritage from Africa—and you plant this people in a highly pressurized situation and they survive, they’re surviving with all of those motivations and with all of the basic ingenuity which any group develops in order to remain alive. Let’s not play these kids cheap; let’s nd out what they have. What do they have that is a strength? What do they have that you can approach and build a bridge upon? Education is all a matter of building bridges, it seems to me. Environment is bouncing everything o everybody in this country. It is wide open; television is around. You see antennas on shacks, electric iceboxes on back porches, with the electricity brought in from a neighbor’s pole, cars are ying around, jazz musicians are invading the backwoods with modi cations of language, verbal as well as musical, new styles of dress are being introduced. The things which come at you in a Negro grade school are just as diverse as those which come at you in an upper-class white school. The question is how can you relate the environment to yourself? How can one discover, for instance, that well-cooked chitterlings are part of a cuisine? It took me a lot of living and going to France to realize this obvious fact. I said to myself, “What on earth are

these Frenchmen doing? This is peasant food; chitterlings are peasant food. There are some great masters of Negro cooking.

Chitterlings must be part of a high low-class cuisine!”

Some of us look at the Negro community in the South and say that these kids have no capacity to manipulate language. Well, these are not the Negroes I know. Because I know that the wordplay of Negro kids in the South would make the experimental poets, the modern poets, green with envy. I don’t mean that these kids possess broad dictionary knowledge, but within the bounds of their familiar environment and within the bounds of their rich oral culture, they possess a great virtuosity with the music and poetry of words. The question is how can you get this skill into the mainstream of the language, because it is without doubt there. And much of it nds its way into the broader language. Now *I* know this just as William F

aulkner knew it. This does not require a lot of testing; all you have to do is to walk into a Negro church.

What lters out this richness when the children come North? It is, in part, a re ection of their sense of being dispossessed of the reality to which their vocabulary referred. Where they once possessed the keys to a traditional environment—the South—they now confront an environment that appears strange and hostile. An environment cluttered with objects and processes for which they have no words and which too often they are prevented from approaching by poverty, custom and race. They are being educated in the streets.

Sanity suggests that the street child learns that which prepares him to live in a world that is immediate and real. To fail to recognize this is to expect far too much of a human being while crediting him with far too little humanity.

Thus we must recognize that the children in question are not so much “culturally deprived” as products of a di erent cultural complex. I’m talking about how people deal with their environment, about what they make of what is abiding in it, about what helps them to nd their way, and about that which helps them to be at home in the world. All this seems to me to constitute a culture. If you can abstract their manners, their codes, their

customs and attitudes into forms of expression, if you can convert them into forms of art, if you can stylize them and give them many and subtle ranges of reference, then you are dealing with a culture. People have learned this culture; it has been transferred to them from generation to generation, and in its forms they have projected their most transcendent images of themselves and of the world.

Therefore one of the problems is to get the so-called “culturally deprived” to realize that if they take what we would give them, they don’t have to give up all of that which gives them their own sense of identity. Indeed, the nation needs some of the very traits which they bring with them: the group discipline, the patience, the ability to withstand ceaseless provocation without breaking down or losing sight of their ultimate objective. We need aggressiveness. We need daring. We even need the little guy who, in order to prove himself, goes out to conquer the world. Psychologically Napoleon was not di erent from the slum kid who tries to take over the block; he just had big armies through which to amplify his aggression.

But how can we keep the daring and resourcefulness which we often nd among the dropouts? I ask this as one whose work depends upon the freshness of language. How can we keep the discord owing into the mainstream of the language without destroying it? One of the characteristics of a healthy society is its ability to rationalize and contain social chaos. It is the steady ltering of diverse types and cultural in uences that keeps us a healthy and growing nation. The American language is a great instrument for poets and novelists precisely because it could absorb the contributions of those Negroes back there saying “dese” and

“dose” and forcing the language to sound and bend under the pressure of their need to express their sense of the real. The damage done to formal grammar is frightful, but it isn’t absolutely bad, for here is one of the streams of verbal richness.

As we approach the dropouts, let us identify who *we* are and where we are. Let us also have a little bit of respect for what we were and from whence we came. There is a bit of the phony built into every American. This is inevitable in a conscious society that has developed as swiftly as ours has. We are faced with endless possibilities for change, for metamorphosis. We

change our environment, our speech, our styles of living, our dress, and often our values. So, in e ect, we become somebody else—or so we are tempted to believe—and often we act as though we have no connection with our past. We are all tempted to become actors, and when we forget who we are and where we are from, our phony selves take command.

When the phony me appears, there is a favor I would ask of anyone: nudge me and say, “Look, you, you’re really just *you*!”

Because the great mystery of identity in this country, really on the level of a religious mystery, and one of our greatest challenges is that everybody here is an American and yet is a member of some unique minority. Everyone knows this when he starts out into the world, but often we forget it. The best teacher, it seems to me, for those Negro youngsters who have been so harmed, so maimed by the sudden confrontation of a world that is more complex than any that they are prepared to deal with, is the teacher who can convey

to them an awareness that they do indeed come from somewhere, some place of human value, and that what they’ve learned there does count in the larger society.

Let us remind ourselves that it is not merely the lower-class Negro child who has di culties in dealing with our society. After teaching three years in a progressive school where I had only two or three Negro students, I am aware that we here should also be concerned with people who come from sections of the society lying far distant from Negro slums. Therefore I do not believe that the basic problem is a Negro problem, no matter what the statistics tell us. I do believe that there has to be some e ort made to bring our system of education into line with what we say we are, and into line with those ideals which we celebrate in ritual and ceremony on patriotic occasions. If you have a society in which all men are declared equal (I am not speaking racially now), then it seems to me that you must act out of an assumption that any people which has not been destroyed after three hundred years of our history, and which is still here among us, is a people possessing great human potentialities and strengths which its members have derived from their background. And it follows that those potentialities are to be respected.

One of the worst things for a teacher to do to a Negro child is to treat him as though he were completely emasculated of potentiality.

But this, I'm sorry to say, is also true of some Negro teachers. Not all, fortunately, but far too many. At Tuskegee during the thirties, most of the teachers would not speak to a student outside the classroom. The students resented it, *I* resented it, and I could never take them very seriously as teachers. Something was in the way. A fatal noise had been introduced into the communication.

As you can see, I am not making this a racial matter. I insist, in fact, that the harm can be done by anyone from any background. To speak topically, there are a lot of distortions getting into the picture of the Negro situation now as we Negroes become more publicly agitated over our condition. Our enemies are being sharply designated, and this is a good thing. Nevertheless, the rst people to do Negroes damage are usually other Negroes. If it were otherwise,

we wouldn't be human; we'd be somehow immune to the shaping force of our parents and relatives and to the presence of our immediate community. Much of the damage sustained by Negroes begins in the Negro family, and much of it occurs in the Negro nursery school, kindergarten, and the rst few grades. Worse, the people who do the harm are not always vicious, but often they dislike themselves, and often they have utter contempt for us little

"burr-heads."

Consider this: one of the most in uential musicians to come out of Oklahoma was a gifted boy who never took part in school musical activities (and ours was a musically oriented Negro community) because he was considered "lower class" in his attitudes. I refer to Charlie Christian, the jazz guitarist, who accomplished that rare feat of discovering the jazz idiom, the jazz voice, of a classical instrument. Yet here was a child who lived in a hotbed of everything that middle-class people fear: the tuberculosis rate was sky-high, crime, prostitution, bootlegging, illness. There was all of the disintegration which you nd among rural Negroes who are pounding themselves to death against the sharp edges of an urban environment. Yet Oklahoma City at that time was one of the most

wonderful places I've ever known. Imagination was freely exercised by the kids. They made toys. They made and taught themselves to play musical instruments. They lived near the city dump, and they converted the treasures they found there to their own uses. This was an alive community in which the harshness of slum life was inescapable, but in which the strength and imagination of these people was much in evidence. Yet you would have to say that it was indeed lower class, and lower-lower class and, according to the sociologists, utterly hopeless. Certainly it was no place to search for good minds or ne talent.

But how many geniuses do you get *anywhere?* And where *do* you nd a rst-class imagination? Who really knows? Imagination is where you nd it; thus we must search the whole scene. But how many pretentious little kids have we been able to develop through progressive education! We can turn out a hell of a lot of these. I once taught at Bard College, where the students were highly

articulate, some of them highly imaginative and creative. But many were utterly unprepared by their education to live in this world without extensive aid. What I'm trying to say is that it is *not* that we are all estranged from our backgrounds and given skills that don't apply to the real world, but that something basically wrong is happening to our educational system. We are missing the target, and *all* of our children are su ering as a result. To be ill-clothed, ill-housed and ill-fed is not the only way to su er deprivation. Frank Reissman, who taught at Bard, has much to say about the "culturally deprived child," but does he recognize that many there were also culturally deprived kids? When a child has no sense of how he should t into the society around him, he is culturally deprived, no matter how high his parents' income. When a child has no fruitful way of relating the cultural traditions and values of his parents to the diversity of cultural forces with which he must live in a pluralistic society, he is culturally deprived. When he has to spend a great part of his time in the care of a psychoanalyst, he is, again, culturally deprived. Thus I would broaden the de nition.

Now, what is the source of this trouble? Obviously this is not a Negro problem. Obviously it is not only the result of great cultural deprivation or family dislocation, because the students there were for the most part middle

class, and in fact eighty percent were Jewish. When compared with the Negro slum family, their backgrounds were quite stable indeed. Therefore it seems to me that there has been some more basic dislocation between that which an education is supposed to guarantee the child and the nature of the world in which he has to live. For one thing, many American children have not been trained to reject enough of the negative values which our society presses upon them. Nor have they been trained su ciently to preserve those values which sustained their forefathers and which constitute an important part of their heritage.

Frequently they are not trained to identify those aspects of the environment to which it is to their best interest—and to the best interest of the nation—to say "No." Too often they have not been taught that there are situations, processes, experiences that are not

only to be avoided, but feared. Think of how many of our youths from the best middle-class families have taken to drugs.

Which brings me back to the education the child gets in the street.

There is a con ict between the child's own knowledge, his own intuitive feeling, and the sense of security he gets through the gang that leads him to *reject* many of the values which are o ered him by the schools. He has found a counter-scheme for living. Museums are rejected because they make him think of going places and doing things that are ultimately frustrating. The New York theaters have been open to Negroes for years and years. How many attend them?

How many of us do you see in downtown audiences? More than ever before, true, but certainly not in proportion to the Negro population. Let us not discuss the irrelevance of the plays presented there. The point is that this represents a world beyond reach.

Indeed, do I dare turn my imagination, even as a writer, upon the possibility of living in that world from which I'm partially barred? I could do so only as an act of faith or recklessness. The schools weren't the least bit encouraging, but I was always interested in writing, and nally I became interested in how writing was written.

And then I realized that I couldn't a ord *not* to become a writer; I had to become a writer because I had gotten the spirit of literature and had become aware of the possibilities o ered by literature—not to make money, but to feel at home in the world, to feel that I could come into the possession of a certain part of reality.

I'm fascinated by this whole question of language because when you get people who come from a Southern background, where language is manipulated with great skill and verve, and who upon coming north become inarticulate, then you *know* that the proper function of language is being frustrated.

The great body of Negro slang—that unorthodox language—exists precisely because Negroes need words which will communicate, which will designate the objects, processes, manners and subtleties of their urban experience with the least amount of distortion from the outside. So the problem is, once again, what do we choose and what do we reject of that which the greater society makes available?

These kids with whom we're concerned, these dropouts, are living

critics of their environment, of our society and our educational system, and they are quite savage critics of some of their teachers.

I don't know what intelligence is. But this I do know, both from life and from literature: whenever you reduce human life to two plus two equals four, the human element within the human animal says, "I don't give a damn." *You* can work on that basis, but the kids cannot. If you can show me how I can cling to that which is real to me, while teaching me a way into the larger society, then I will not only drop my defenses and my hostility, but I will sing your praises and help you to make the desert bear fruit.

Lecture given at seminar on "Education for Culturally Di erent Youth," conducted by Bank Street College of Education at Dedham, Mass., September 3–15, 1963.

The Myth of the Flawed White Southerner THE question of how I regarded the President's statement that "Art is not a political weapon" was

put to me by a group of young Negro writers during 1965, following President Johnson's sponsoring of a National Festival for the Arts at the White House. The Festival had been attacked by certain well-known writers, and these young men were seriously concerned with the proper relationship between the artist and government. I replied to their question by reading aloud from the President's address to the artists attending the Festival: Your art is not a political weapon, yet much of what you do is profoundly political, for you seek out the common pleasures and visions, the terrors and cruelties of man's day on this planet. And I would hope you would help dissolve the barriers of hatred and ignorance which are the source of so much of our pain and danger…

a statement to which I was sympathetic, both as a foreshortened description and as the expression of a hope.

The young men then asked my opinion of the President's grasp of political reality, and I replied that I thought him far ahead of most of the intellectuals who were critical of him, "especially those Northern liberals who have become, in the name of the highest motives, the new apologists for segregation." I went on to say that

"President Johnson's speech at Howard University spelled out the meaning of full integration for Negroes in a way that no one, no President, not Abraham Lincoln nor Franklin Roosevelt, no matter how much we loved and respected them, has ever done before.

There was no hedging in it, no escape clauses."

My reference to the segregationist tendencies of certain intellectuals and Northern liberals caused a few of my white colleagues to charge that I had "changed" or sold out to the

"establishment," and I lost a few friends. The incident forced me to realize once again that for all the values that I shared, and still share, with my fellow intellectuals, there are nevertheless certain basic perspectives and attitudes toward art and politics, cultural a airs and politicians, which we are far from sharing. I had to accept the fact that if I tried to adapt to their point of view, I would not only be dishonest but would violate disastrously that

sense of complexity, historical and cultural, political and personal, out of which it is my fate and privilege to write. My colleagues spoke out of their own interests, and properly so, but I found it irritating that they seemed to assume that *their* interests were automatically mine, and that supposedly I and those of my background possess no interest that they, my friends and colleagues, had any need to understand or respect.

Later, in thinking of this disagreement, I found myself recalling that during 1963 I was among those present at the White House for a celebration of the First Centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation given by President John F. Kennedy, an occasion of special signi cance for me, both as the grandson of slaves and as a writer and former student of Tuskegee Institute. For I was aware of the fact that in 1901, during the rst month of his administration, Theodore Roosevelt had provoked a national scandal by inviting Booker T. Washington, Tuskegee's founder, to a White House dinner, a gesture taken by some as more menacing to the national security than an armed attack from a foreign nation. The invitation changed political alignments in the South, upset the structure of the Republican party, and caused President Roosevelt to advise Negro Americans to avoid careers in the professions and to subjugate their own political and social interests to those of antagonistic white Southerners.

As a novelist interested in that area of the national life where political power is institutionalized and translated into democratic ritual and national style, I was impressed by the vividness with which a White House invitation had illuminated the emotional complexities and political dynamite underlying American social manners, and I welcomed the opportunity for closer observation

that the occasion a orded. It seemed to me that one of the advantages that a novelist such as Henry James had over those of my generation was his familiarity with the movers and shakers of the nation, an advantage springing from his upper-class background and the easy availability of those who exercised political and social power. Artists who came later were likely to view such gures from a distance, and thus have little opportunity to know at rsthand the personalities who shape the nation's a airs. It is fortunate that with the Kennedy and Johnson administrations this was no longer true.

At the celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation, some sixty-two years after the Washington incident, the majority of the four hundred or more White House guests were Negroes, and I was struck by how a cordial gesture once considered threatening to the national stability had with the passing of time become an accepted routine. Where Theodore Roosevelt had been put on the defensive and bowed before anti-Negro taboos, President Kennedy was free to celebrate the freeing of the slaves as an important step toward achieving a truer American democracy. So as I brooded over the Festival controversy I asked myself if my memory of the Booker T.

Washington incident had in uenced the stand I took, and whether I had been so in uenced by historical and racial considerations that I underevaluated the issues which so concerned my fellow intellectuals.

I concluded that perhaps I had. Nor was it simply that as a charter member of the National Council on the Arts, I felt that governmental aid to the American arts and artists was of a more abiding importance than my hopes that the Vietnam war would be brought to a swift conclusion. My response to the President's critics was shaped, in fact, by that personal and group history which had shaped my background and guided my consciousness, a history and background that marked a basic divergence between my own experience and that of the dissenting intellectuals. So for me the Festival was charged with meanings that went deeper than the issue of the government's role in the arts or the issue of Vietnam; it had also to do with the President's own background, his accent of speech and his values. And when I put the two social occasions into

juxtaposition, the Emancipation celebration and the Festival for the Arts, I found it symbolic that my disagreement with my fellow intellectuals had been brought into focus around the gure of a President of Southern origin.

I say symbolic because, historically speaking, my presence at the Festival for the Arts was the long-range result of an act, in 1863, of an even more controversial holder of the presidency, Abraham Lincoln. For it was Lincoln who, after a struggle involving much vacillation, procrastination and rescissions, nally issued the Proclamation that allowed me to be born a relatively free American.

Obviously this was not as important a factor in my friends'

conception of the nation's history; therefore it has not become a functioning factor in shaping their social and political awareness.

Hence, while we may agree as to the importance of art in shaping the values of American society, we are apt to disagree about the priorities in attacking social and political issues.

Some of the intellectuals in question spring from impoverished backgrounds, but for historical reasons none has ever been poor in the special ways that Negro Americans are poor. Some began to write, as did I, during the 1930s, but here again none came to writing careers from a background so barren of writers as mine. To these racial and historical di erences is added the fact that we spring from di erent regions of the land. I had come from a di erent part of the country and had been born of parents who were of this land far longer than many of theirs had been, and I had grown up under conditions far more explicitly di cult than they.

Which outlines another important di erence: I had come from a region adjacent to that from which the President emerged, and where the American language was spoken—by whites, at least—

with an accent much like that with which he speaks. It is a region that has grown faster and in a more unplanned way than the East has grown, and it is a place where one must listen beneath the surface of what a man has to say, and where rhetorical style is far less important than the relationship between a man's statements and his conduct.

When I was growing up, a Negro Oklahoman always listened for a threat in the accent of a white Texan, but one learned to listen to the individual intonation, to *what* was said as well as to *how* it was said, to content and implication as well as to style. Black provincials cannot a ord the luxury of being either snobbish or provincial. Nor can they ignore the evidence of concrete acts.

President Johnson's style and accent are said to be an important factor in his di culties with many intellectuals, especially those of the literary camp. But

perhaps what one listens for in the utterance of any President is very similar to what one listens for in a novel: the degree to which it contains what Henry James termed “felt life,”

which can here be translated to mean that quality conveyed by the speaker’s knowledge and feeling for the regional, racial, religious, and class unities and di erences within the land, and his awareness of the hopes and values of a diverse people struggling to achieve the American promise in their own time, in their own place, and with the means at hand.

It would seem that a few literary intellectuals would impose a di erent style and accent upon the President, but they forget that all individual American styles re ect a regional background, and this holds true for national leaders no less than others. Thus, while a President’s style and way with language are of national importance, he cannot violate the integrity between his inherited idiom and his o ce without doing violence to his initial source of strength. For in fact his style and idiom form a connective linkage between his identity as representative of a particular group and region of people and his identity as President of *all* the people.

It is possible that much of the intellectuals’ distrust of President Johnson springs from a false knowledge drawn from the shabby myths purveyed by Western movies. Perhaps they feel that a Texan intoning the values of humanism in an unreconstructed Texas accent is to be regarded as suspiciously as a Greek bearing gifts; thus they can listen to what he says with provincial ears and can ignore the President’s concrete achievements here at home while staring blindly at the res of a distant war.

Well, I too am concerned with the war in Vietnam and would like to see it ended, but the fact remains that I am also familiar with other costly wars of much longer duration right here at home—the war against poverty and the war for racial equality—and therefore I cannot so easily ignore the changes that the President has made in the condition of my people and still consider myself a responsible intellectual. My sense of priorities is of necessity di erent.

One thing is certain. I must look at the gure of the President from a slightly di erent angle, and although I try to approach people and events with

something of that special alertness granted to those who give themselves over to the perceptive powers of the novel, I must dismiss any temptation to see President Johnson, or any living President, strictly in terms of his possibilities as a ctional character—which, I believe, is an impulse of many literary intellectuals when confronting the presidential role.

For example, when the image of President Lincoln is evoked by the resemblance between the 1960s and the 1860s—war, racial unrest, technological change, the inadequacies of established institutions and processes before the demand for broader economic and social freedom—the Lincoln who emerges is that gure released by the bullets red at Ford's Theatre. It is not the backwoods politician who fought throughout the tragic years of the Civil War to keep the nation whole, not the troubled man who rode the whirlwind of national chaos until released by death while watching the comedy *Our American Cousin*.

Yet it was that unpopular, controversial Lincoln whose deeds, whose manipulation of power—political, rhetorical, and moral—

made possible the gure we create for ourselves whenever we think of the personi cation of democratic grandeur and political sainthood.

Lyndon B. Johnson is credited even by his enemies as being a political genius, but the phenomenon of a great politician becoming President confronts us with a dual gure, for even while entangled in the di culties of his o ce, he is identi ed by role with the achievements of the proven great who preceded him there. In our minds he is locked in a struggle with the illustrious dead even

though he must be a man who manipulates power and involves himself in the muck and mire out of which great political parties are composed. He must be a man who initiates uneasy compromises and deals, who blends ideals and expediencies, who achieves what he can in order to give reality to his vision. He is a gure who knows better than most of us that politics is the art of the possible, but *only* of the possible, and that it is only by ghting against the limits of the politically possible that he can demonstrate his mastery and his worth.

But when such a gure is elevated to the presidency an element of doubt soon enters the picture. Political action, his native mode, is tied to techniques—persuasion, eloquence, social pressure, compromises, and deals—all techniques that during our troubled times are increasingly confounded by the press and by the apparent clairvoyance of electronic data media which, as they seek to convert events into drama, work to undermine the mysteries of presidential power. The question of credibility is raised, and we approach the presidency with demands for a minute-to-minute knowledge of intricate events that is impossible even between the most devoted husband and wife. Little allowance is made for secrecy, indecision, interpersonal or international process. He is expected to be master not only of the present but of the future as well, and able to make decisions with the omniscience of a god. Most of all, he is expected to be an incarnation of Justice.

Part of the di culty springs from the notion that great personalities are the results not of technical mastery but of some mysterious leap out of the past of race, class and family onto a plateau from which an inherent mastery may be exercised with a superhuman facility. To this view great deeds are assumed to be the attributes of great personality. President Lincoln is taken to be the author of great deeds not because he was a great and persistent politician, but because he possessed a great personality, very much as great poets are assumed to be great men because they composed great poems. And in the case of great Presidents now dead, the arrogance, the blind spots, the failures of will and vision are

forgotten before the great transforming deeds that their deaths delineated as having marked their administrations.

Literary intellectuals make this mistake because they owe the formation of their functional personalities and their dreams to literature. Thus, for them a great President is rst of all a master of

“style,” a mythical gure born of all the great (and preferably eloquent) Presidents who preceded him. But having attained the presidency, he is paradoxically expected to have no further function as a politician. Indeed, he is expected to be above politics in a way virtually impossible if he is to exercise the powers and responsibilities of o ce.

But to my mind, in these perpetually troubled United States a great President is one through whom the essential con icts of democracy—the struggle between past and present, class and class, race and race, region and region—are brought into the most intense and creative focus. He is one who releases chaos as he creates order.

He arouses hopes and expectations, even as he strives to modify the structures that have supported an unjust stability in the interest of securing a broader social freedom. He is not necessarily a man possessing a new style of action or eloquence, but rather one who recognizes that the American is one whose basic problem is that of accepting the di cult demands of his essential newness in a world grown increasingly turbulent. He is one who knows instinctively, in the words of W. H. Auden, that for the American "it is not a question of the Old Man transforming himself into the New, but of the New Man becoming alive to the fact that he is new, that he has been transformed [by the land, by technology, by the break with the past, by the diversity of a pluralistic society] without his having realized it."

The great President is also a man possessed by his role, and one who becomes, to a painful extent, a prisoner of his role, and there is evidence that President Johnson is aware of this. "Every day," he has said,

there come to this o ce new problems and new crises and new di culties demanding discussion and consultation and decision. I must deal with them,

possessing no gift of prophecy, no special insight into history. Instead, I must depend, as my thirty-ve predecessors depended, on the best wisdom and judgment that can be summoned to the service of the nation. This counsel must come from people who represent the diversity of America.

Nor is he unaware of the limitations of his power: A President must have a vision of the America and the world he wants to see.

But the President does not put his purely personal stamp upon the future. His vision is compounded of the hopes and anxieties and values of the people he serves. The President can help guide them toward the highest and most noble of their desires. He cannot take them where they do not want to

go. Nor can he hope to move ahead without the help of all those who share a common purpose.

I believe the presidency was conceived as an o ce of persuasion more than of sheer power. That is how I have tried to use the o ce since it was thrust upon me.

One of the most persistent criticisms of President Johnson is that he is arrogant, but few who echo the charge bother to question its source or the sinister irony it expresses. Although it is too early for nal judgments, it is possible that what has been called the President's arrogance is actually an expression of a profound and dedicated humility before the demands and responsibilities of his o ce. Perhaps he is becoming possessed by the o ce in much the manner that Abraham Lincoln was possessed, and is being consumed before our television-focused eyes by the role that he might well have expected, as politician, to have dominated.

As I see it, there is anguish here: an anguish born of strenuous e orts which turn endlessly into their opposites, of e orts to communicate which fail to get through, an anguish born of measures passed and projects set up only to be blocked, stalled, deprived of funds, and kept from functioning often by those who should in the nation's broader interest render all assistance. His most successful measures have produced impatience and released forces and energies which obscure the full extent of his accomplishments. And they are great accomplishments. No one has initiated more legislation for education, for health, for racial justice,

for the arts, for urban reform than he. Currently it is the fashion of many intellectuals to ignore these accomplishments and promises of a broader freedom to come, but if those of other backgrounds and interests can a ord to be blind to their existence, my own interests and background compel me to bear witness.

For I must be true to the hopes, dreams and myths of my people.

So perhaps I am motivated here by an old slave-born myth of Negroes—not the myth of the "good white man," nor that of the

“great white father,” but the myth, secret and questioning, of the awed white Southerner who while true to his Southern roots has confronted the injustices of the past and been redeemed. Such a man, the myth holds, will do the right thing however great the cost, whether he likes Negroes or not, and will move with tragic vulnerability toward the broader ideals of American democracy. The gure evoked by this myth is one who will grapple with complex situations that have evolved through history, and is a man who has so identi ed with his task that personal considerations have become secondary. Judge Waties J. Waring of South Carolina was such a man, and so—one hopes and suspects—is Lyndon Baines Johnson. If this seems optimistic, it is perhaps because I am of a hopeful people.

Considering that he has changed inescapably the iconography of federal power, from his military aides to the Cabinet, from the Federal Reserve Board to the Supreme Court, there appears to be ample reason for hope.

When all of the returns are in, perhaps President Johnson will have to settle for being recognized as the greatest American President for the poor and for Negroes, but this, as I see it, is a very great honor indeed.

From *To Heal and to Build,* McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1968.

If the Twain Shall Meet

HOWARD Zinn’s *The Southern Mystique* is yet another reminder that American history is caught again in the excruciating process of executing a spiral—that is, in returning at a later point in time to an earlier point in historical space—and the point of maximum tortuosity is once again the South.

It would seem that the basic themes of our history may be repressed in the public mind, but like corpses in mystery dramas, they always turn up again —and are frequently more troublesome.

Yes, and with an added element of mystery. “To hit,” as hunters say,

“is history, to miss is mystery.” For while our history is characterized by a swift and tightly telescoped continuity, our *consciousness* of history is

typically discontinuous. Like quiescent organisms in the blood, our unresolved issues persist, but with our attention turned to other concerns we come to regard the eruption of boils and chancres that mark their presence with our well-known

“American innocence.” Naturally, this leaves us vulnerable to superstition, rumor, and the manipulation of political medicine men.

Nevertheless, so imperative are our national commitments that while one group in our historical drama inevitably becomes inactive once the issues that aroused it are repressed, a resuscitation of the old themes will nd a quite similar group taking its place on the redecorated stage. Frequently unaware of the earlier performers of its roles—because awed, as are most Americans, by an ignorance of history—the new group dresses in quite di erent costumes but speaks in its own accents the old vital lines of freedom.

Thus the rst Reconstruction saw a wave of young whites hurrying south to sta the schools the Freedmen’s Bureau was establishing for emancipated slaves. Enthusiastic, energetic, self-sacri cial, these young teachers are long forgotten, yet they were the true predecessors of the young white Northerners now

participating in the sit-ins and voter-registration drives that mark the second —or resumption of—Reconstruction. Today’s young crusaders are predominantly students, but here too, acting in the ranks and as advisers, are teachers like the author of *The Southern Mystique*.

Currently an associate professor of government at Boston University, Mr. Zinn has been chairman of the history department at Spelman College, a school for Negro women located in Atlanta, Georgia. His book is an account of his experiences as a member of an integrated faculty, as a resident in a predominantly Negro university community, and as an adviser to the Student NonViolent Coordinating Committee. It attempts to confront the problems arising from the Negro’s quest for civil rights—and the white Southerner’s agony in accepting change—not with slogans nor with that smug attitude of moral superiority typical of many Northerners’

approach to the South, but with a passion to discover a rationale for hope and a theoretical basis for constructive action. Signi cantly, Mr. Zinn places the burden of insight and sympathy upon the outsider, and thus upon himself.

With such works as *The Southern Mystique*, Calvin Trillin's *An Education in Georgia*, and Bernard Taper's *Gomillion vs. Lightfoot*, the second Reconstruction is receiving its on-the-spot documentation, as once again young Northerners are bent upon trying to reduce the chaos and mystery of the South, and our involvement in it, to some semblance of human order. Mr. Zinn would give us a human perspective on the present struggle, and in this sense his book belongs with such works of the rst Reconstruction as *The Journal of Charlotte L. Forten* and Thomas Wentworth Higginson's *Army Life in a Black Regiment*. Like these, in reporting a social action it reveals a state of mind.

In achieving change Mr. Zinn would base his actions upon sound thinking. He would not only reexamine our major assumptions concerning man and society, but would also appropriate any new concepts developed by social psychology, Neo-Freudian analysis, and the ndings of such specialists in Southern history as C. Vann Woodward. Philosophically he has tried to forge, for himself at

least, a fresh concept of man. In the areas of race relations this is a most necessary endeavor, and while I disagree with some of his procedures and conclusions, I am sympathetic with his attempt to do pragmatically what our best critical minds have failed even to recognize as important.

Mr. Zinn's example reminds us that one of the most exciting intellectual phenomenons of recent years has been the stir created among Northern intellectuals by the French Existentialists' theory of *engagement*. How frequently has the word turned up in their writings! How often have I been asked to sign—and have signed—

their petitions decrying injustices in Europe, Asia and the Middle East! Yes, and how sensitive have they been to those who have struggled in the Soviet Union, in Hungary, in Algeria—and well they might, for injustice always wears the same harsh face wherever it shows itself. Yet today one of the

most startling disjunctures in our national life has been the failure of many of these intellectuals to involve themselves either by their writings or their activities (except, perhaps, for wearing CORE's equality buttons in their lapels) in our own great national struggle.

One wouldn't suspect that the South has been the center of our national dilemma, both political and moral, for most intellectuals have never seriously confronted the South or its people, few have visited there, and most have drawn their notions about Southerners from novels or from political theorists and sociologists who themselves have never been there. And while in all probability most of these intellectuals reject the values or debasement of values for which the South has stood (even though they admire and often imitate the poets, novelists and critics whom the South has produced), few feel any obligation to obtain rsthand knowledge—

not even those who write so con dently (and there are Negroes among these) about the "meaning" of Negro experience. The events set in motion by the Supreme Court decision of 1954 and accelerated by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and which are now transforming not only the South but the entire nation—events that are creating a revolution not only in our race relations but in our political morality—have found them ominously silent.

My complaint isn't simply that they don't know the South or the Negro, but that their failures to learn about the country leave them at the mercy of politicians, unreliable reporters and rumormongers.

Nor does it help their posture of intellectual authority. Indeed, many confuse the "Negro revolution" with the so-called "sexual revolution" (really a *homosexual* revolution), and this has led them to praise unbelievably bad art in the mistaken notion that they are helping to extend Negro freedom. No wonder that when the civil rights struggle moves into their own neighborhoods, many of them have nothing to fall back upon except the same tired clichés about sexual rivalry, miscegenation and Negro self-hate that have clouded the human realities of the South.

Well, Howard Zinn is no Zen Buddhist; he is a passionate reformer, and his passion lends his book the overtones of symbolic action. In this sense it involves a dual journey, one leg of which took him and his family to live in

what, in his own words, “is often thought to be the womb of the South’s mystery, the Negro community of the Deep South,” and the other of which led him into that violent and mysterious region evoked in the mind by the work of Margaret Mitchell, Wilbur J. Cash and William Faulkner—a region cloaked by an “invisible mist” which not only blurred perspective but distorted justice and de ed reason. Here *The Southern Mystique* relates a journey into the unknown, involving an *agon* of dangerous action, a reversal of purpose leading to a

“revolution in perception,” and a return to the North with what Mr.

Zinn o ers as a life-preserving message—i.e., his book.

From his base in the Negro community—this “womb,” this sanctuary, this place of growth, rebirth, and vision, resting in the

“tranquil eye” of the South’s hurricane of racial tensions—Mr. Zinn was to discover “those tiny circles of shadow out of sight, where people of several colors meet and touch as human beings …” And now he believes that contact between the races is a key to understanding and change, because contact—“intimate, massive and more than momentary—reshu es all sensory memories and dissolves the mystique built upon the physical characteristics of the Negro.” One gathers that, for him, contact, in a context of

ameliorative action, produces a catharsis that is not only sensory and psychological, but intellectual and moral. Fear is exorcised, the errors springing from prejudice are corrected, and a rede nition of purpose, both personal and social, becomes possible. The assumption here is that social change is sparked by the concern of responsible individuals, and an overtone of individual salvation sounds throughout Mr. Zinn’s book. He speci es, however, that interracial contact must be *equal*, which excludes most of the usual contacts between Negroes and whites, whether North or South. Thus the coming together of whites and Negroes in the interest of change is change in itself, and therefore threatening to those who fear the widening of American democracy.

In the “womb” of the Negro community, Mr. Zinn was moved to the passionate purpose of dispelling the mystique which he found cloaking the human realities of the South. After living there for seven intense years, he believes that he has discovered the reality underlying the Southern mystique: racial fear is its core. He sees the white Southerner not as a gure of horror but as an American who exhibits certain national characteristics in an exaggerated form. The South, he writes, “is still the most terrible place in America [but]

because it is, it is lled with heroes.” Yet I must say that his perception (and he is conscious of this) has by no means been completely puri ed. Not when he can write that “every cliché uttered about the South, every stereotype attached to its people, white and Negro, is true,” even though he adds the quali cation that “a thousand other characteristics, complex and subtle, are also true …”

Surely this is to concede too much to rhetorical strategy. The clichés and stereotypes attached to the South are no more “true”

than those attached to any other region or people. What Mr. Zinn means, perhaps, is that they contain an *element* of truth. Stereotypes are fabricated from fragments of reality, and it is these fragments that give them life, continuity and availability for manipulation.

Even this depends upon the psychological predisposition of those who accept them. Here, in fact, is the secret of the stereotypes’

tenaciousness. Some people must feel superior on any ground

whatsoever, and I’m afraid that for far too many, “whiteness” is the last desperate possibility. Unfortunately this need has become contagious, and now, as should be expected, certain Negroes, who for years have been satis ed to be merely human and stake their chances upon individual attainment, are succumbing to *blackness* as a value.

As would be expected of a book involved with race and color in the United States, *The Southern Mystique* is concerned with seeing and non-seeing,

with illusion and reality, but also with intellectual clarity. His own e orts to see clearly and act e ectively lead Mr.

Zinn to believe that certain key concepts in uencing our view of personality tend to inhibit action in the eld of civil rights. He is critical of Freudian psychology, for instance, because he feels that a concern with its categories leads to a “pervasive pessimism” about men in society. Agreeing with Sartre’s “man is condemned at every instance to invent man,” he suggests that in achieving change in the South, the point of departure is not a philosophical investigation of cause, because “once you acknowledge *cause* as the core of a problem, you have built something into it that not only ba es people, but, worse, immobilizes them.” (Evidently he really believes that the devil appears only at man’s bidding.)

Mr. Zinn would therefore leave cause to the philosophers and, as an activist, concentrate on results. After all, he argues, “A physicist may … not know what *really* lies behind the transformation of matter into energy, but if he has gured out how to release this energy, his achievement is stupendous.” It is true that in many tightly controlled experiments the scientist must still play it by ear, and true again that civilizations have produced great art while leaving unsolved the problem of where babies come from, yet Zinn’s argument makes me uneasy if for no other reason than that it evokes the myth of the sorcerer’s apprentice. Not only does it blithely put aside the intractable fact that human beings are creatures of memory and spirit, as well as of conscious motivation, but it makes too much mystery of what, in its political aspects, is really a struggle for power, as white and Negro Southerners understand very well.

Nevertheless, Mr. Zinn’s rejection of the gradualists’ assumption that a change in thinking must precede changes in behavior seems justi ed by the actual dynamics of recent social changes in the South. Thus his observation that “ rst you change the way people behave by legal or extralegal pressures of various kinds, in order to transform the environment which is the ultimate determinant of the way they think” seems valid not only on the basis of current events, but also because it describes what actually happened to Negroes following the betrayal of Reconstruction. Indeed, Mr. Zinn

draws upon the researches of C. Vann Woodward to demonstrate how comparatively recent segregation has been a support of the

“Southern way of life.”

In answer to the fear that white Southerners will accept change and then retaliate violently, he considers this no reason to slow the pace of action. Today, he holds, neither change nor its approval depends upon the white Southerner’s will, but only upon his

“quiescence.” For now, he writes, what is called “intelligent white leadership … is really the exercise of in uence by some whites to get other whites to follow, however grumblingly, the leadership of Negroes … whose decisions on tactics are the parents of those decisions on law that are made in the courts and announced in the headlines.”

In other words, we’ve spiraled back to a situation similar to the one that followed the Hayes-Tilden Compromises; where the violence of sheri s deputies and nightriders formed the force by which the white leadership then achieved its will. Today Negroes have converted their grievously acquired discipline in absorbing violence nonviolently into a force for changing their condition.

Perhaps we have made too much of the “moral” nature of Negroes’

struggle because their demands for freedom have *always* been moral; what is new is that their e orts now have sanction in national law. Thus they can, if only in extreme instances, call upon the ultimate force of federal troops, a protection denied them since the end of Reconstruction.

Mr. Zinn points out, however, that except in rare instances change is being achieved in the South through a “mammoth internal

convulsion,” and that “in almost all cases where desegregation has occurred, the white South has made its own decision for acceptance.” He explains this by noting a human fact long obscured by the Southern mystique (though not for Southern Negroes who have had to know better): the white Southerner has a “hierarchy of values, in which some things are

more important than others, and segregation, while desirable, does not mean as much to him as certain other values [which] he has come to cherish." Thus he makes choices "with the guidance of some subconscious order of priorities, in a eld of limited possibilities."

To his awareness of the relationship between the individual's hierarchy of values and Southern change, Mr. Zinn adds Kurt Lewin's dictum, derived from the " eld theory" of theoretical physics, that "behavior depends neither upon the past nor the future, but on the present eld"—a view which, if true, is true only in a highly quali ed sense. Nevertheless it allows Zinn a certain optimism in approaching Southern white behavior "not as the inevitable results of a xed set of psychological traits, but as the response to a group atmosphere which is susceptible of manipulation."

Whatever the validity of applying " eld theory" to human psychology, one of the strategies of the Negro freedom movement is to exert pressures in the social eld that will move whites to make choices favorable to Negroes' goals. This actually is a very old maneuver of Negro strategy, characterized by careful timing and exibility within what, since the 1870s, has been a fairly rigid eld.

B ut theory is theory and practice is what we make it, while the past asserts itself regardless.

If Southern whites (who seem as unfamiliar with " eld theory" as with Edmund Wilson's "sea slug" theory of the Civil War) respond to change as they have in the past—that is, often violently—then Negroes have usually reacted as they did most frequently in their own past—namely, nonviolently. Today, however, the absorbing of blows has become a political technique, and thus a value. A prime source of Negro morale is their knowledge that their forefathers survived so much violence (one of the major supports of the

"American way of life," by the way) during times when the highest court in the land was against them. How, by the way, does one say

"Negro American" without at once implying "slave" and, one hopes,

“free man and equal and responsible citizen”?

But do not let me quibble here, for I am aware that theory has no necessary correspondence in action, nor means with results. Social change, nevertheless, involves the use of words, and words, even Mr. Zinn’s words, are rooted deep in the realities of the past.

Zinn bolsters his argument with Harry Stack Sullivan’s observation on the importance of the “signi cant other” in interpersonal relationships. He also suggests that intellectuals, scholars and especially policy makers should be aware that in confronting (or failing to confront) problems of social change, they are no mere neutral observers but participants who modify the situation by a ecting the eld of social forces. In this sense, then, there is no escape; one acts even by not acting—a useful reminder for those who trouble over how to apply the concept of *engagement* to the current struggle; one wishes to shout “Hear, Hear!” But his suggestion that an administration that recognizes its own activity as a force a ecting white behavior might “map much bolder policies than one basing its moves on the passive situation represented by public opinion polls” seems far too charitable toward politicians’

motives.

For while the myths and mysteries that form the Southern mystique are *irrational* and even *primitive*, they are nevertheless real, even as works of the imagination are “real.” Like all mysteries and their attendant myths, they imply—as Jane Harrison teaches us in *Themis*, her study of ancient Greek religion—a rite. And rites are *actions*, the goal of which is the manipulation of power—in primitive religions magical power, in the South (and in the North) political power.

Further, in our own representative form of government the representatives of the white South (few of whom represent Negroes) are all too often the most dedicated, most magic-befouled manipulators of the mystique that surrounds American race prejudice. Neither Strom Thurmond nor Governors Johnson and

Wallace have any intention of surrendering the power issuing from the Southern mystique out of the goodness of their hearts. They will give way only before the manifestation within the South of the broader, more human American myth of equality and freedom for all. Not even the presence in the White House of an even more signi cant Southern “other” has inhibited the celebrants of the rites of Southern prejudice, and now they have been joined by Senator Goldwater. Race remains an active political force because they make it so, and their techniques of manipulation are traditional.

“The most vicious thing about segregation—more deadly than its immediate denials of certain goods and services—is,” in Mr. Zinn’s opinion, “its perpetuation of the mystery of racial di erences.” I would have thought that the impact of segregation and discrimination upon individual and group alike would be more important. Most Negroes ignore the mystique of race di erences, even as they comply with Southern law and custom. For they know through their own experience the super ciality of the evidence upon which the myth of white superiority rests. They also know that they haven’t lived all these years as servants to a race of gods. The folk verse—“These white folk think/That they so ne, *But their dirty linen stinks* Just like mine!”—while irreverent and a bit bawdy, is a sharp-nosed, clear-eyed observation of reality. No, it is less the mystique that harms us than the denial of basic freedom. It is not the myth that places dynamite in a Sunday school but terrorists carrying out a ritual of intimidation; while the word slanders, the practice in icts death. If whites can accept change without surrendering their prejudices—and here Mr. Zinn sees quite clearly

—so have Negroes existed under that prejudice without accepting its contentions.

I must leave it to more quali ed critics to assess the broader implications of Mr. Zinn’s theoretical approach, but I believe that his e ort to see freshly and act constructively is, despite all objections, overwhelmingly important. His speculations have followed courageous action, and he is aware of how urgently the activities of the Negro Freedom Movement demand clari cation in theoretical structuring. One source of the problem is our lack of any

adequate de nition of Negro life and experience, which is far from being as simple as many thinkers assume.

But here Mr. Zinn's own urgency blurs his perception. He believes that man has in his power the means to bring himself and society closer to a more human ideal, and his key term is *action*. His assault upon the viciousness committed in the name of instinct, race and history makes him prefer theories that underplay the in uence of the past—ironically, a tendency that reformers share with reactionaries and conservatives, who would repress all details of the past that would unmask their mythologies. Thus Gordon Allport's hypothesis that "motives are contemporary … not bound functionally to historical origins or to early goals, but to present goals only" a ords Zinn optimism in the eld of action. But action does not imply insight, because the past is clearly present in the motivation of the Negroes with whom Zinn worked in the South.

Perhaps in shrugging o the encumbrances of the past, he failed to observe them (or even to identify with them) in su cient depth.

Zinn suggests that half a generation ago the Southern Negro personality was essentially that of the archstereotype of "Sambo"

(that craven creation of nineteenth-century white Southern pseudosociology, recently reintroduced into what passes for intellectual discussion by Stanley M. Elkins), but was suddenly transformed by the Supreme Court Decision of 1954 into the "proud Negro demonstrator who appears in exactly those little towns and hamlets … that produced silence and compliance a half generation ago."

But here he is being taken in—both by Elkins and by his own need to recreate man, or at least Negro man, in terms of the expediencies of the historical moment. Didn't he notice that some of the older sharecroppers who are sheltering and advising the young Northern crusaders would seem to look, talk and, when the occasion requires it, *act* like this alleged "Sambo"? He is perceptive when he notes that the terrible aspects of Southern life have made for many heroes, but he might also have noted that Southern life is the most dramatic form of life in the United States, and because of this is full of actors. In fact, the Southern mystique has assigned roles to whites

as well as to Negroes—except that for Negroes the outcome of abandoning the role is frequently tragic, for it leads to terror, pitiful su ering and death.

In concentrating on the mystery of race, Mr. Zinn overlooks the more intriguing mystery of culture (it is interesting how often, for an activist, *culture* means *politics*!). Still, the Southern Negroes who have *revealed* themselves since 1954 are not products of some act of legal magic; they are the products of a culture, a culture of the Southern states, and of a tradition that ironically they share with white Southerners. But with Negroes it developed out of slavery and through their experiences since the Civil War and the rst Reconstruction. Thus when Zinn writes, “There are two things that make a person a ‘Negro’: a physical fact and a social arti ce,” he misses the wonderful (and fortunate) circumstance that the Negro American is something more. He is the product of the synthesis of his blood mixture, his social experience, and what he has made of his predicament, i.e., his *culture*. His quality of wonder and his heroism alike spring no less from his brutalization than from that culture.

Indeed, those Negroes whom Mr. Zinn has joined in action risk their lives out of a sense of life that has been expressed movingly in the blues but seldom on a more intellectually available level—even though, I believe, it is one of the keys to the meaning of American experience. For if Americans are by no means a *tragic* people, we might well be a people whose fundamental attitude toward life is best expressed in the blues. Certainly the Negro American’s sense of life has forced *him* to go beyond the boundaries of the tragic attitude in order to survive. That, too, is the result of his past.

One needn’t agree with Mr. Zinn that the initiative in the South is now in Negro hands (there is the matter of antagonistic cooperation to be considered), but many clues to action are to be found in their own dramatic experience. They have known for a long time, for instance, that you can change the white Southerner’s environment without changing his beliefs because such changes have marked the uctuations of Negro freedom. Negroes also know the counterpart of this fact: namely, that you prepare yourself for desegregation and

the opportunities to be released thereby *before* this freedom actually exists. Indeed, it is in the process of preparation for an elected role that the

techniques of freedom are discovered and that freedom itself is released.

The Negro Freedom Party of Mississippi, for instance, arose out of a mock political action, and as a mockery of the fraudulent democracy of the Democratic party of Mississippi. Its mockery took the form of developing techniques for teaching Negroes denied the right to vote how to form a political party and participate in the elective process. In the beginning it possessed all of the

"arti ciality" of a ritual, but the events, the "drama" acted out in Atlantic City, saw the transformation of their mockery and playacting into a signi cant political gesture that plunged them into the realms of conscious history. Here the old slave proverb "Change the joke and slip the yoke" proved a lasting bit of wisdom. For Negroes the Supreme Court Decision of 1954 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 induced no sudden transformation of character; it provided the stage upon which they could reveal themselves for what their experiences have made them, and for what they have made of their experiences. Here past and present come together, making possible a collaboration across the years between the old abolitionists and such contemporary activists as Howard Zinn. Nor should we forget that today Negroes are freeing themselves.

If I seem overly critical of *The Southern Mystique*, it is by no means out of a lack of respect for its author and what he has attempted to do. His is an act of intellectual responsibility in an area that has been cast outside the range of intellectual scrutiny through our timidity of mind in the face of American cultural diversity. Mr. Zinn has not only plunged boldly into the chaos of Southern change, but has entered that mazelike and barely charted area wherein twenty million Negro Americans impinge upon American society socially, politically, morally, and therefore culturally. One needn't agree with Zinn, but one cannot a ord not to hear him out. And once we read him —and we must read him with our best attention—we can no longer be careless in our thinking about the Negro revolution, for he makes it clear that it involves us all.

Review in *Book Week* (New York *Herald Tribune),* November 8, 1964.

What America Would Be Like Without Blacks THE fantasy of an America free of blacks is at least as old as the dream of creating a truly democratic society. While we are aware that there is something inescapably tragic about the cost of achieving our democratic ideals, we keep such tragic awareness segregated in the rear of our minds. We allow it to come to the fore only during moments of great national crisis.

On the other hand, there is something so embarrassingly absurd about the notion of purging the nation of blacks that it seems hardly a product of thought at all. It is more like a primitive re ex, a throwback to the dim past of tribal experience, which we rationalize and try to make respectable by dressing it up in the gaudy and highly questionable trappings of what we call the “concept of race.”

Yet despite its absurdity, the fantasy of a blackless America continues to turn up. It is a fantasy born not merely of racism but of petulance, exasperation and moral fatigue. It is like a boil bursting forth from impurities in the bloodstream of democracy.

In its benign manifestations, it can be outrageously comic, as in the picaresque adventures of Percival Brownlee, who appears in William Faulkner’s story “The Bear.” Exasperating to his white masters because his aspirations and talents are for preaching and conducting choirs rather than for farming, Brownlee is “freed” after much resistance and ends up as the prosperous proprietor of a New Orleans brothel. In Faulkner’s hands the uncomprehending drive of Brownlee’s owners to “get shut” of him is comically instructive.

Indeed, the story resonates certain abiding, tragic themes of American history with which it is interwoven, and which are causing great turbulence in the social atmosphere today. I refer to the exasperation and bemusement of the white American with the black, the black American’s ceaseless (and swiftly accelerating) struggle to escape the misconceptions of whites, and the continual

confusing of the black American’s racial background with his individual culture. Most of all, I refer to the recurring fantasy of solving one basic problem of American democracy by “getting shut”

of the blacks through various wishful schemes that would banish them from the nation's bloodstream, from its social structure, and from its conscience and historical consciousness.

This fantastic vision of a lily-white America appeared as early as 1713, with the suggestion of a white "native American," thought to be from New Jersey, that all the Negroes be given their freedom and returned to Africa. In 1777, Thomas Je erson, while serving in the Virginia legislature, began drafting a plan for the gradual emancipation and exportation of the slaves. Nor were Negroes themselves immune to the fantasy. In 1815 Paul Cu e, a wealthy merchant, shipbuilder and landowner from the New Bedford area, shipped and settled at his own expense thirty-eight of his fellow Negroes in Africa. It was perhaps his example that led in the following year to the creation of the American Colonization Society, which was to establish in 1821 the colony of Liberia. Great amounts of cash and a perplexing mixture of motives went into the venture.

The slaveowners and many Border-state politicians wanted to use it as a scheme to rid the country not of slaves but of the militant free Negroes who were agitating against the "peculiar institution." The abolitionists, until they took a lead from free Negro leaders and began attacking the scheme, also participated as a means of righting a great historical injustice. Many blacks went along with it simply because they were sick of the black-and-white American mess and hoped to prosper in the quiet peace of the old ancestral home.

Such con icting motives doomed the Colonization Society to failure, but what amazes one even more than the notion that anyone could have believed in its success is the fact that it was attempted during a period when blacks, slave and free, made up eighteen percent of the total population. When we consider how long blacks had been in the New World and had been transforming it and being Americanized by it, the scheme appears not only fantastic, but the

product of a free-oating irrationality—indeed, a national pathology.

Nevertheless, some of the noblest of Americans were bemused.

Not only Je erson but later Abraham Lincoln was to give the scheme credence. According to historian John Hope Franklin, Negro colonization seemed as important to Lincoln as emancipation. In 1862, Franklin notes, Lincoln called a group of prominent free Negroes to the White House and urged them to support colonization, telling them. “Your race su ers greatly, many of them by living among us, while ours su ers from your presence. If this is admitted, it a ords a reason why we should be separated.”

In spite of his unquestioned greatness, Abraham Lincoln was a man of his times and limited by some of the less worthy thinking of his times. This is demonstrated both by his reliance upon the concept of race in his analysis of the American dilemma and by his involvement in a plan of purging the nation of blacks as a means of healing the badly shattered ideals of democratic federalism.

Although benign, his motive was no less a product of fantasy. It envisaged an attempt to relieve an inevitable su ering that marked the growing pains of the youthful body politic by an operation which would have amounted to the severing of a healthy and indispensable member.

Yet like its twin, the illusion of secession, the fantasy of a benign amputation that would rid the country of black men to the bene t of a nation’s health not only persists; today, in the form of neo-Garveyism, it fascinates black men no less than it once hypnotized whites. Both fantasies become operative whenever the nation grows weary of the struggle toward the ideal of American democratic equality. Both would use the black man as a scapegoat to achieve a national catharsis, and both would, by way of curing the patient, destroy him.

What is ultimately intriguing about the fantasy of “getting shut”

of the Negro American is the fact that no one who entertains it seems ever to have considered what the nation would have become had Africans *not* been brought to the New World, and had their descendants not played such a complex and confounding role in the

creation of American history and culture. Nor do they appear to have considered with any seriousness the e ect upon the nation of having any of

the schemes for exporting blacks succeed beyond settling some fteen thousand or so in Liberia.

We are reminded that Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who has recently aggravated our social confusion over the racial issue while allegedly attempting to clarify it, is co-author of a work which insists that the American melting pot didn't melt because our white ethnic groups have resisted all assimilative forces that appear to threaten their identities. The problem here is that few Americans know who and what they really are. That is why few of these groups—or at least few of the children of these groups—have been able to resist the movies, television, baseball, jazz, football, drum-majoretting, rock, comic strips, radio commercials, soap operas, book clubs, slang, or any of a thousand other expressions and carriers of our pluralistic and easily available popular culture. It is here precisely that ethnic resistance is least e ective. On this level the melting pot did indeed melt, creating such deceptive metamorphoses and blending of identities, values and lifestyles that most American whites are culturally part Negro American without even realizing it.

If we can resist for a moment the temptation to view everything having to do with Negro Americans in terms of their racially imposed status, we become aware of the fact that for all the harsh reality of the social and economic injustices visited upon them, these injustices have failed to keep Negroes clear of the cultural mainstream; Negro Americans are, in fact, one of its major tributaries. If we can cease approaching American social reality in terms of such false concepts as white and nonwhite, black culture and white culture, and think of these apparently unthinkable matters in the realistic manner of Western pioneers confronting the unknown prairie, perhaps we can begin to imagine what the United States would have been, or not been, had there been no blacks to give it—if I may be so bold as to say—color.

For one thing, the American nation is in a sense the product of the American language, a colloquial speech that began emerging long before the British colonials and Africans were transformed into

Americans. It is a language that evolved from the King's English but, basing itself upon the realities of the American land and colonial

institutions—or lack of institutions—began quite early as a vernacular revolt against the signs, symbols, manners and authority of the mother country. It is a language that began by merging the sounds of many tongues, brought together in the struggle of diverse regions. And whether it is admitted or not, much of the sound of that language is derived from the timbre of the African voice and the listening habits of the African ear. So there is a *de'z* and *do'z* of slave speech sounding beneath our most polished Harvard accents, and if there is such a thing as a Yale accent, there is a Negro wail in it—doubtless introduced there by Old Yalie John C. Calhoun, who probably got it from his mammy.

Whitman viewed the spoken idiom of Negro Americans as a source for a native grand opera. Its exibility, its musicality, its rhythms, freewheeling diction and metaphors, as projected in Negro American folklore, were absorbed by the creators of our great nineteenth-century literature even when the majority of blacks were still enslaved. Mark Twain celebrated it in the prose of *Huckleberry Finn;* without the presence of blacks, the book could not have been written. No Huck and Jim, no American novel as we know it. For not only is the black man a co-creator of the language that Mark Twain raised to the level of literary eloquence, but Jim's condition as American and Huck's commitment to freedom are at the moral center of the novel.

In other words, had there been no blacks, certain creative tensions arising from the cross-purposes of whites and blacks would also not have existed. Not only would there have been no Faulkner; there would have been no Stephen Crane, who found certain basic themes of his writing in the Civil War. Thus also there would have been no Hemingway, who took Crane as a source and guide. Without the presence of Negro American style, our jokes, tall tales, even our sports would be lacking in the sudden turns, shocks and swift changes of pace (all jazz-shaped) that serve to remind us that the world is ever unexplored, and that while a complete mastery of life is mere illusion, the real secret of the game is to make life swing. It

is its ability to articulate this tragic-comic attitude toward life that explains much of the mysterious power and attractiveness of that quality of Negro American style known as "soul." An expression of American diversity

within unity, of blackness with whiteness, soul announces the presence of a creative struggle against the realities of existence.

Without the presence of blacks, our political history would have been otherwise. No slave economy, no Civil War, no violent destruction of the Reconstruction, no K.K.K. and no Jim Crow system. And without the disenfranchisement of black Americans and the manipulation of racial fears and prejudices, the disproportionate impact of white Southern politicians upon our domestic and foreign policies would have been impossible. Indeed, it is almost impossible to conceive of what our political system would have become without the snarl of forces—cultural, racial, religious—that make our nation what it is today.

Absent, too, would be the need for that tragic knowledge which we try ceaselessly to evade: that the true subject of democracy is not simply material well-being, but the extension of the democratic process in the direction of perfecting itself. And that the most obvious test and clue to that perfection is the inclusion, *not* assimilation, of the black man.

Since the beginning of the nation, white Americans have su ered from a deep inner uncertainty as to who they really are. One of the ways that has been used to simplify the answer has been to seize upon the presence of black Americans and use them as a marker, a symbol of limits, a metaphor for the “outsider.” Many whites could look at the social position of blacks and feel that color formed an easy and reliable gauge for determining to what extent one was or was not American. Perhaps that is why one of the rst epithets that many European immigrants learned when they got o the boat was the term “nigger”; it made them feel instantly American. But this is tricky magic. Despite his racial di erence and social status, something indisputably American about Negroes not only raised doubts about the white man’s value system, but aroused the

troubling suspicion that whatever else the true American is, he is also somehow black.

Materially, psychologically and culturally, part of the nation’s heritage is Negro American, and whatever it becomes will be shaped in part by the Negro’s presence. Which is fortunate, for today it is the black American

who puts pressure upon the nation to live up to its ideals. It is he who gives creative tension to our struggle for justice and for the elimination of those factors, social and psychological, which make for slums and shaky suburban communities. It is he who insists that we purify the American language by demanding that there be a closer correlation between the meaning of words and reality, between ideal and conduct, between our assertions and our actions. Without the black American, something irrepressibly hopeful and creative would go out of the American spirit, and the nation might well succumb to the moral slobbism that has always threatened its existence from within.

When we look objectively at how the dry bones of the nation were hung together, it seems obvious that some one of the many groups that compose the United States had to su er the fate of being allowed no easy escape from experiencing the harsh realities of the human condition as they were to exist under even so fortunate a democracy as ours. It would seem that some one group had to be stripped of the possibility of escaping such tragic knowledge by taking sanctuary in moral equivocation, racial chauvinism or the advantage of superior social status. There is no point in complaining over the past or apologizing for one's fate. But for blacks there are no hiding places down here, not in suburbia or in penthouse, neither in country nor in city. They are an American people who are geared to what *is*, and who yet are driven by a sense of what it is possible for human life to be in this society. The nation could not survive being deprived of their presence because, by the irony implicit in the dynamics of American democracy, they symbolize both its most stringent testing and the possibility of its greatest human freedom.

From *Time*, April 6, 1970.

Portrait of Inman Page: A Dedication Speech WHEN confronted by such an unexpected situation as this, what does one say? It's not that I haven't been aware of Dr. Page's in uence upon my life, for after all these years he is apt to be conjured up by a wide variety of contacts and situations. And he was so dominant a gure during my school days that his voice and image are still evoked by certain passages of the Bible. I remember him in a context of ceremonies, in most of which he acted as the celebrant, but never in my

wildest fantasies would I have anticipated my being called upon to play a role in a ceremony dedicated to his memory.

Such a development would have seemed impossible because in my mind my relationship with Dr. Page has remained what it was back in the 1930s, which was that of a boy to a grand, digni ed elder. In my scheme of things there remained between us a xed hierarchal distance that had been dictated by age, accomplishment and authority. So while I would have had no problem in imagining myself witnessing such a ceremony as this, the idea of my having an active role in it would have been in the realm of the impossible. And now that I nd myself standing here, it is as though a preordained relationship has been violated, and as a result my sense of time has begun leaping back and forth over the years in a way which assaults the logic of clock and calendar, and I am haunted by a sense of the uncanny.

All the more so as I look at these portraits in which Richard Yarde depicted Dr. Page as he appeared when a student here at Brown. He was a much older man when I came to know him, but the digni ed educator with whom I was familiar is pre gured in the portraits, especially in the cast of the eyes. This makes for a pleasant surprise, because during my school days it never occurred to me that Inman Page had *ever* been a young man. To me he was always lofty and enigmatic, a gure of authority and penetrating vision. Perhaps that

is why I am haunted by a feeling that somehow Dr. Page must have prearranged today's proceedings years ago, with the foreknowledge that at some predestined time and place they would culminate, at least for me, in a moment of astonishment and instruction.

Now, I don't know whether Dr. Page ever indulged in the old American pastime of practical joking when he was a student here, but I *do* know that practical jokes can be used as agencies of instruction, and that they can indeed be calculated to challenge one's wits and test one's alertness. I also know that they can be staged in such a way that a narrowing of the hierarchal distance between those of lowly status and their superiors is brought about.

Not necessarily by e ecting a ritual de ation of those who are glamorous and exalted (as happens in the celebration of Mardi Gras), but by way of elevating the lowly for a brief moment to the level of their superiors, and thus initiating them into the mysterious processes of time and authority. Because they sponsor a sense of equality, such symbolic elevations have an important function in our democracy, and are likely to be operating when we least expect.

I say this because if there is such a joke at play in these proceedings, doubtless it is asserting its presence by forcing me to respond to the implication of this ceremony in spontaneous words. Perhaps this is why it is as though I am once again undergoing an examination, which this time Dr. Page is conducting from a point beyond time and space.

But such speculations aside, how could such an occasion as this come about? Through the medium of time, of course, and through the interplay, both intentional and accidental, between certain American ideals and institutions and their human agents. More speci cally, it has come about through the e orts exerted by the members of one generation of Americans in the interest of the generations which were to follow. Such occasions are a product of the living continuity of earlier historical contacts and relationships which were initiated during the turbulent days of our nineteenth century, and which have persisted even when their origins have been forgotten or ignored. Such occasions are made possible because ideas and ideals retain their vitality by being communicated

from concerned individuals to other (sometimes resistant) individuals. But when these ideas and ideals succeed in nding embodiment in receptive personalities, they become linkages which have the power to shape obscure destinies in unexpected ways.

Sometimes they manage to a rm our faith by reversing our expectations. Thus we are gathered here today as the result of such linkages between ideals and personalities which were forged and began forming a chain of cause and e ect more than a hundred years ago.

Which is to suggest that from the period of the Emancipation there has been transmitted throughout the Afro-American areas of this country a

continuing in uence that sprang from the early New England tradition of education. This tradition, which has contributed so much to this nation's vitality, was introduced into the areas of the South from which I spring by young graduates of New England colleges who went south to teach newly freed slaves. I am, incidently, the grandson of a freedman, which would appear to be something of an irony of history. But despite the rapid acceleration of historical change in the United States, the period of slavery isn't so far in the past as it might seem. Inman Page, who was himself a slave and who left this campus at a time when the dismantling of the Reconstruction was well under way, was a bearer of that same tradition of New England education of which I speak, and through him its standards were imparted to many ex-slaves and their descendants. Since that transmitted tradition is still alive, I think it a good idea to keep this historical circumstance in mind when we hear glib talk of a "white culture" and a "black culture" in the United States. Because the truth of the matter is that between the two racial groups there has always been a constant exchange of cultural and stylistic elements. Whether in the arts, in education, in athletics, or in certain conceptions and misconceptions of democratic justice, interchange, appropriation and integration (not segregation) have been the constants of our developing nation. So at this particular moment of our history I think it important that we keep in mind that the culture of the United States is a composite, pluralistic culture-of-cultures, and that all of its diverse elements

have been to some extent inspirited by those ideals which were enshrined during the founding of this nation. In our embrace of these ideals we are one and yet many, and never more so than after they led to the Civil War, the Emancipation and the Reconstruction.

It was these ideals which inspired the many examples of personal courage such as can be seen in the life of Inman E. Page. Certainly his act of implanting the ideals of New England education out in the

"Territory," that then wild young state of Oklahoma, called for both courage and a dedication to education. Because by the time he graduated from Brown, Reconstruction, which had promised full citizenship to the freedmen, was, as I have said, well on the way toward betrayal. It was a

most pessimistic period for his people, but he did his best, and therefore, thanks to Inman Page, no matter how incongruously, I am here.

I must confess, however, that as a student I always found the man forbidding. I realize now that much of my intimidation was due to his sheer personal style, his quality of command. At Brown he was chosen the orator of his class, and during my school days he was indeed eloquent. I can still hear him reading from Saint Paul's Letters to the Corinthians, as he did so often during our daily chapel exercises. Just listening to him taught one the joy and magic of words. He made one believe in his message because he expressed authority in the smallest gesture. I don't mean that he was pompous; indeed, he was quite fatherly. But for me at least he possessed an aura of the untouchable. In his presence one was careful of one's manners, and since it was his role to punish those guilty of serious misconduct with a strapping, personal contact with him was to be avoided. Usually I managed to keep out of his way, but one memorable day I failed.

It was at a time when the student body was gathering in the school's auditorium for chapel services. During these exercises the junior and senior high school boys were seated on the platform behind the lectern from which Dr. Page conducted the religious services. This platform was actually a stage that was used for concerts and theatricals, and was equipped with a curtain that could be raised and lowered by ropes that were lashed to the oor on

either side. We took our places on stage left and right by marching up short ights of stairs, which were favorite sites for horseplay.

This involved much pushing and shoving, not to mention other attacks upon one's anatomy. Sometimes these could be both painful and degrading; therefore, being on this occasion somewhat out of sorts, I told myself that if some guy pushed me, I was going to swing on him and start punching.

Well, I got pushed and went into action; unfortunately for me, it wasn't a student who took my punch, but Dr. Page. Before I realized what was happening, Dr. Page had grabbed me, I had grabbed the ropes of the stage curtain, and the two of us went swinging in a tight circle that carried us

around and around over the platform and steps until I lost my grip and caused the two of us to fall, with me landing on top of Dr. Page.

Well, Dr. Page was probably as shocked by this sudden eruption of chaos as I was, but he was still in command.

“What do you think you’re doing, boy,” he roared. “What do you think you’re doing!”

Even today I’m unsure of my reply, but for years afterward a good friend used to remind me of the incident by suddenly breaking out with high-pitched cries of “We fell, Mister Page! Mister Page, we *fell*!”

I’m still unsure of what I said, because I was too excited. But as Dr. Page pushed me o and snatched me to my feet a most amazing thing occurred: in spite of my fear and excitement and the teeth-rattling shaking he was giving me, I could hear Dr. Page chuckling under his breath. Then he was chasing me, literally, straight up the aisle and out of the auditorium, and as I headed up a ight of stairs to the walk, with him right behind me, I could hear him thundering,

“And don’t come back! Don’t you *dare* come back!”

It was a rough moment for me, a fall into chaos and disgrace, with the student body roaring its delight. All the more so because of that mysterious chuckle, a chuckle which was so incongruous that I could not be certain I had heard it. But I had, because the next day Dr. Page relented and got word to me that I hadn’t been permanently expelled. In fact, I returned and managed to keep out

of serious trouble from that day until I graduated. That one chaotic contact with authority was enough for me.

Now I’ll bring these remarks to a close by suggesting that if Dr.

Page is present with us in spirit, and I’m sure he is, no doubt he is still chuckling as he did on the day he chased me from school.

Because here, once again, he nds himself a participant in another most incongruous juxtaposition, a juxtaposition in which his old student Ralph Ellison is linked unexpectedly to the exaltation of *his* principal.

From *The Carleton Miscellany*, Winter 1980; address given September 19, 1979, at the Ralph Ellison Festival at Brown University.

Going to the Territory

ONCE again I must wonder at the sheer unexpectedness of life in these United States. Even the most celebrated of writers would nd this scene exhilarating, but for me—well, it is simply overwhelming.

It's as though I am being rebuked, even if ever so gently, for every instance in which I doubted the possibility of communicating my peculiar vision to my fellow Americans. Now I realize how fortunate I am to have held on to literature as a medium for transcending the divisions of our society, for your presence a rms that faith most generously.

But Lord knows I had no idea that such emotional turmoil would be the price for becoming the focus of such a scene. It reminds me of how often I've been told that extremes will meet, and it proves the correctness of those who advised me that in this country it is always wise to expect the unexpected. I say this because your campus has become the scene in which certain lines of interpersonal, institutional, and even historical relationships have not only come together but have collided in a way which I nd most confounding. And it all began yesterday with the ceremony in Rockefeller Library, during which I was presented with one of Richard Yarde's portraits of Dr. Inman E. Page. Now, here in Sayles Hall, the shock wave set o by that collision appears on its way toward a rousing Wagnerian crescendo of the unexpected.

Since Inman Page was the rst Afro-American to graduate from Brown University, the honor paid him here last September wasn't surprising, but that it should be *my* fate to be honored a year later with the presentation of his portrait is an example of the unexpected outdoing itself in demonstrating its power to surprise. Because in yesterday's ceremony two lines of destiny, which had touched during the early 1920s and then diverged rather abruptly

during the Great Depression, were brought together again under circumstances

which in those days would have been unimaginable. It is true that their divergence began with an educational ceremony, but no one would have been so rash as to predict that a recapitulation would occur, not even at a point in what was then the far distant future. In other words, yesterday's ceremony would have been unthinkable—

even as a comic, practical-joking in ation of the original. Yet all of the elements were already in motion.

One of Dr. Page's many roles after his graduation from Brown was that of supervisor of education for Negroes and principal of the old Douglass High School in Oklahoma City. I attended old Douglass (which was named in honor of Frederick Douglass, the ex-slave abolitionist) from the rst grade through the twelfth, and at my graduation Dr. Page presented me with my diploma. Thus ended—

or appeared to end—our years of relationship. I went south to college, and except for the summer vacation of my sophomore year, I was not to return home again for some seventeen years. On my return I was to see Dr. Page for the last time, and with my attention turned elsewhere, I thought his in uence upon my life had concluded.

But for me as for most members of our community, students and adults alike, Dr. Page served as a representative gure. As such he inspired the extremes of ambivalent emotion: love and hate, admiration and envy, fear and respect. He moved many of his students to secret yearnings to possess some of his implicit authority, some of his wisdom and eloquence, and in fact quite a number became teachers and community leaders. Today his in uence is such that although he passed away some forty years ago, one has only to bring a group of his old students together and immediately he lives again in apotheosis. This has been happening out in the Southwest for many years, but I have no doubt that much of the turmoil which I feel this evening springs from the unexpectedness of nding his personality such a powerful presence in a place so far from where I knew him. So perhaps that which we term the "unexpected" is really a product of that which we do not know

or fail to take into account. Learn enough about a given phenomenon and the unexpected becomes fairly predictable.

Which suggests that although Dr. Page spent his life working in segregated institutions and thus was overlooked by those who record the history of American education, he was nonetheless a gure of national importance, and one who in uenced history despite having been forced to work outside its rather arbitrarily drawn framework. If so, the honor paid him here last year celebrated not only his relationship with Brown, but marked the recognition of his national signi cance as an educator. At any rate, once in a while the veil which shrouds the details of our unwritten history is thrown back, and not only do the deserving nd belated recognition, but sometimes marvelous interconnections between the past and the present spring to light.

So, thanks to the administrators of Brown University, thanks to Michael Harper and his assistants, and thanks to the intricate relationship which obtains between Brown and American history generally, an attempt was made to rediscover some of the more obscure connections through which the past has become a part of the living present. Somehow in that process of retrieval, an Oklahoma boy was found whose life was profoundly in uenced by Inman E. Page, and so I stand before you.

Yet considering the ironic fact that Americans continue to nd themselves stumbling into (as well as over) details of their history, tonight's is a most *American* occasion. For it is one in which by seeking to move forward, we nd ourselves looking back and discovering with some surprise from whence we've come. Perhaps this is how it has to be. Given the circumstances of our national origins, our vast geopolitical space and the improvised character of our society, and given the mind-boggling rapidity of our national growth, perhaps it is understandably di cult for Americans to keep in touch with what has happened to them. At any rate, in the two hundred years of our national existence a great deal has been overlooked or forgotten. Some developments become obscure because of the sheer rush and density of incidents which occur in any given period of time; others fade through conscious design, either because of an unwillingness to solve national dilemmas or because we possess such a short attention span and are given to a

facile waning of our commitments. Moreover, having had no adequate model to guide us in establishing what we told ourselves was to be a classless society, it has often been di cult for us to place people and events in a proper perspective of national importance. So it is well that we keep in mind the fact that not all of American history is recorded. In some ways we are fortunate that it isn't, for if it were, we might become so chagrined by the discrepancies which exist between our democratic ideals and our social reality that we would soon lose heart. Perhaps this is why we possess two basic versions of American history: one which is written and as neatly stylized as ancient myth, and the other unwritten and as chaotic and full of contradictions, changes of pace and surprises as life itself. Perhaps this is to overstate a bit, but there is no denying the fact that Americans can be notoriously selective in the exercise of historical memory.

Surely there must be some self-deceptive magic in this, for in spite of what is left out of our recorded history, our unwritten history looms as its obscure alter ego, and although repressed from our general knowledge of ourselves, it is always active in the shaping of events. It is always with us, questioning even when not accusing its acclaimed double, and with the two locked in mute argument which is likely to shock us when it becomes visible during periods of national stress. Meanwhile, yearning and thirsting for a rational social order, and being forced as human beings to live in what we like to identify as the "present," we go on struggling against the built-in conditions which comprise the pathology of American democracy. Perhaps it is our need to avoid the discouraging facts of our experience that accounts for the contradiction between those details of our history which we choose to remember and those which we ignore or leave unstated.

But no matter how we choose to view ourselves in the abstract, in the world of work and politics Americans live in a constant state of debate and contention. We do so no matter what kinds of narrative, oral or written, are made in the reconstruction of our common experience. American democracy is a most dramatic form of social organization, and in that drama each of us enacts his role by

asserting his own and his group's values and traditions against those of his fellow citizens. Indeed, a battle-royal con ict of interests appears to be basic

to our conception of freedom, and the drama of democracy proceeds through a warfare of words and symbolic actions by which we seek to advance our private interests while resolving our political di erences. Since the Civil War this form of symbolic action has served as a moral substitute for armed warfare, and we have managed to restrain ourselves to a debate which we carry on in the not always justi ed faith that the outcome will serve the larger interests of democracy. Unfortunately this doesn't always work out, and when it doesn't, the winners of a given contention are likely to concern themselves with only the fruits of victory, while leaving it to the losers to grapple with the issues that are left unresolved.

Something like this was taking place at the time Inman Page was graduating from Brown, and it set the tone of the scene in which he was to act. Having won its victory, the North could be selective in its memory, as well as in its priorities, while leaving it to the South to struggle with the national problems which developed following the end of Reconstruction. And even the South became selective in its memory of the incidents that led to its rebellion and defeat. Of course a defenseless scapegoat was easily at hand, but my point here is that by pushing signi cant details of our experience into the underground of unwritten history, we not only overlook much which is positive, but we blur our conceptions of where and who we are. Not only do we confuse our moral identity, but by ignoring such matters as the sharing of bloodlines and cultural traditions by groups of widely di ering ethnic origins, and by overlooking the blending and metamorphosis of cultural forms which are so characteristic of our society, we misconceive our cultural identity. It is as though we dread to acknowledge the complex, pluralistic nature of our society, and as a result nd ourselves stumbling upon our true national identity under circumstances in which we least expect to do so. This is because some of our brightest achievements have been like lights hidden under a basket of myths. Who would have expected that through one of the members of the class of 1877,

Brown University would play a role in the fate of a writer from Oklahoma? More important, who would have thought that Brown's standards of education would a ect the outlook of so many thousands who would never see it?

Thus in the underground of our unwritten history, much of that which is ignored de es our inattention by continuing to grow and have consequences. This happens through a process of apparently random synthesis, a process which I see as the unconscious logic of the democratic process. Set in motion over two hundred years ago with the founding of this nation, it is an irrepressible force which draws its power from those fateful promises that were made in Philadelphia, and it moves all too slowly, but steadily, against and around those forces which would thwart our progress toward the ful llment of the democratic ideal. An aspect of the democratic principles which inspirit our institutions and social processes, it expresses itself in the unremarked contacts between individuals of di ering status and background, and through the impact, accidental or intended, which signi cant individuals exert upon our institutions. Ever at work in our lives, it reveals itself in those gestures and elements of style through which we nd our de nition as Americans. This includes the way we walk, talk and move, but ironically it is likely to become our conscious possession during those moments when events force us to measure that which we have been taught formally and abstractly, against that which we have learned through hard experience. Sometimes when this happens we discover that we are a bit worse than we have been taught, but then again, much better than we would dare believe.

Sometimes we become aware of the underground logic of the democratic process quite consciously, but are likely to perceive the rightness of its products with a feeling of unease. Our perception of justice attained doesn’t always square with our conception of that which is best for our own interests. Sometimes it works its transformations of society so quietly (as during periods of war or economic depression) that we fail to realize that in such interruptions of normal order, injustices that have been long accepted have been resolved. Let’s face it, no matter what motives

are ascribed as leading to the Civil War, it took that con ict for Inman Page to be able to come to Brown. So it is often on this unrecognized level that our democratic ideals are most successful in nudging us toward our goal.

And so it is that we go on striving. We take chances—and are taken by the random working of the democratic impulse—and we continue to assert the old received values, modifying them as seems necessary, but seeking to a

rm them nevertheless. This we do out of our individual yearnings, out of our individual passions, and out of our often halfhearted hopes that some day we will achieve the transcendent dream which was projected by the Founding Fathers when they committed their conception of an ideal society to paper.

That conception was arrived at, remember, through strenuous debate, and we have been arguing with one another ever since. Still, ours is a debate, a contention, in which we seek to make our conception of democracy manifest in every detail of our living. Not only in ags and emblems, or in words and rituals, but even in such details as the architecture of your magni cent buildings, which are among the glories of your campus, and in such minor artifacts as the blue jeans which parade the names of heiresses on the hip pocket.

There has to be a powerful democratic magic in the latter, because for Inman Page's generation education was seen as a way of *not* having to live in blue jeans. But as I say, extremes meet—and this in more ways than one. For in this country we seem to go to any extreme in promoting our notions of excellence, and this can lead to incongruous juxtapositions. There is also the fact that any way one takes it, democracy is a leveling process which moves in any direction along the scale of taste. There is also the fact that in order for democratic principles and ideals to remain vital, they must be communicated not only across the built-in divisions of class, race and religion, but across the divisions of aesthetic styles and tastes as well. When this is achieved, not only do we nd communication and communion, but we learn a bit more about how to live within the mystery which haunts American experience, and that is the mystery of how we are many and yet one. I suppose that when used as costume, blue jeans are a way of dramatizing our basic unity.

Which reminds me that since arriving on campus I've had the pleasure of listening to a number of discussions of my ction, and I've been amazed to discover how much of what I conceived to be a basic pattern of American experience appears to have been communicated to readers who originate on opposite sides of the color line. To me this is most important, not only because I wish to be understood, but because race and color have been basic

determinants in structuring what is one of the most aggravating barriers to free communication in this society. Approach the reality of racial di erences, and our dictionary of democratic terminology can be thrown into confusion, with such common terms as

“equality” and “freedom” turning into their opposites. But when I was listening to these discussions this didn’t happen. It was as though my novel had become a lens through which readers of widely di ering backgrounds were able to see elements of their own experience brought to a unifying focus. In some instances I found this a bit bewildering, even though I am aware that a novel can come alive only through the collaboration of its readers’

imaginations, and it was quite evident that the students who participated with the panelists had been taught to read. But something more was taking place, for it was as though a group of sophisticated minds were functioning like a group of jazz musicians and were working in a spirit of antagonistic cooperation to explore the novel’s hidden possibilities. In a jam session this process works in such a way that not only is the original theme enhanced, but the listener is compelled to experience a feeling of catharsis.

Let me hasten to say that I don’t mean to atter myself by implying that those involved in these discussions were *themselves* undergoing a catharsis. But *I* certainly did, and it left me not only intellectually grati ed but physically weak. Perhaps this was because when one works with words and situations that are commonly charged with divisive emotions, it is gratifying to discover that despite this, you have been able to communicate. And all the more when you know that in this country e ective artistic communication requires a symbolic sharing of emotions and situations which have usually blocked communication in the world

of work and politics. What is important in all this lies in the fact that the terms which allow for communication are the same which we use to spell out our democratic ideals. They are the same terms which inspired Inman Page to take his chances here at Brown, and thus my being here tonight is not only an occasion in which certain details of our common history have come together, but it is also one in which there is revealed something of the fate of those principles in whose name we struggle and in whose spirit we

have often died. I *say struggle* because for all our many achievements as a nation, we have never been able to make our principles adequately manifest in either our conduct or in our social structure. Yet once in a while we have been capable of enormous e orts. Today many agree that the ideals of the Great Society, which were a restatement of the ideals of Reconstruction, have proved to be dross. I would say that this depends upon where one looks. For here in an area that is somewhat bu ered against the contentions of politics, there is evidence that at least some of our e orts have found a measure of success, even as did certain e orts that were launched during the period when Inman Page came to Brown.

Inman Page arrived at Brown University at a time when the optimism which was released among the former slaves by their emancipation was still buoyed by the promises of the already fading Reconstruction. For the rst time Afro-Americans were participating as a group in political a airs, and their right to do so was being protected by federal troops. Thus the nation's tragic drama of sectional warfare appeared to have ended their subjugation. We know now, however, that the freedmen were actors within a play-within-a-play, and that theirs was a tragic action within a larger drama in which events would convert tragedy into farce. And if the larger drama was resolved in the ambiguous victory of the North, theirs would proceed through an abrupt reversal of their group expectations to social and political defeat, because after the Hayes-Tilden Compromise they were forced to live under a system which was close to, and in some ways worse than, slavery. Here, surely, is an example of the rapidity of historical change of which I have spoken. Within thirteen years Afro-Americans were swept from

slavery to a brief period of freedom, to a condition of second-class citizenship. And from a condition of faint hope, through a period of euphoric optimism, to a condition of despair. The familiar world of slavery was gone, but now they faced a world of ambiguity in which their access to even the most fundamental of life's necessities was regulated strictly on the basis of race and color.

Such was the general picture, but in spite of these dismal developments, there were still reasons for cautious optimism. This lay in the physical fact that they were now the owners of their own bodies and had the freedom to

express something of their aspirations as individuals. As slaves they had long been aware that for themselves, as for most of their countrymen, geography was fate.

Not only had they observed the transformation of individual fortune made possible by the westward movement along the frontier, but the Mason-Dixon line had taught them the relationship between geography and freedom. They knew that to be sold down the Mississippi River usually meant that they would su er a harsher form of slavery, and they knew that to escape across the Mason-Dixon line northward was to move in the direction of a greater freedom. But freedom was also to be found in the West of the old Indian Territory. Bessie Smith gave voice to this knowledge when she sang of "Goin' to the Nation, Going to the Terr'tor'," and it is no accident that much of the symbolism of our folklore is rooted in the imagery of geography. The slaves had learned through the repetition of group experience that freedom was to be attained through geographical movement, and that freedom required one to risk his life against the unknown. Geography as a symbol of the unknown included not only places, but conditions relating to their racially de ned status and the complex mystery of a society from which they had been excluded. Emancipation had intensi ed their awareness of the mystery which cloaked the larger society, and they realized that education, the freeing of the mind, was necessary if they were to make the most of their change in legal status. It was out of such circumstances that Inman Page chose to enhance his freedom by coming to Brown, and it was here that he was able to establish his individual worth and prepare himself for his liberating

role as an educator. This much of his story I have known since I was a child, but I am still amazed by the extent to which his willingness to take his chances in unknown territories has a ected my own life.

The theme of this festival is "Goin' to the Territory"; well, I met Dr.

Page in what was rst known as the Indian Territory, and then the Oklahoma Territory. Long before it became the State of Oklahoma the Territory had been a sanctuary for runaway slaves who sought there the protection of the Five Great Indian Nations. Dr. Page went to the Territory in 1898 to become president of what is now Langston University, and by the time he became

the principal of my old school he was a man in his seventies. At that time the state of Oklahoma had attracted many of the descendants of the freed slaves, who considered it a territory of hope, and a place where they could create their own opportunities. It was a magnet for many individuals who had found disappointment in the older area of the country, white as well as black, but for Negroes it had a traditional association with freedom which had entered their folklore. Thus the uneducated and educated alike saw Oklahoma as a land of opportunity. In fact, as principal of Douglass High School, Dr. Page was to succeed a former West Point cadet, Professor Johnson Chestnut Whittaker, whose experiences as a cadet led to a cause célèbre that brought about the dismissal of West Point's superintendent.

Professor Whittaker was a *white* black man. Which is to say that visually he was whiter than almost anyone here in Sayles Hall. But by birth and native background he was a South Carolina slave who had been born the property of the family of U.S. Senator James Chestnut, Jr. His mother was the personal servant of Mary Boykin Chestnut, the author of *A Diary From Dixie*, a famous work of the Civil War period in which the Whittaker family is mentioned. A year before Inman Page graduated from Brown, Johnson C. Whittaker was appointed to West Point, which is an example of the type of transformations that were made possible by Emancipation. But it was also an example of the reversal of expectations wrought by the betrayal of Reconstruction. Whittaker's career ended in a racial attack during which he was seized by other cadets, who tied him to

his cot and notched his ear. My mother, who knew Professor Whittaker in South Carolina, told me that this was done so that he could not measure up to a West Point tradition which held that its graduates had to be physically perfect. This incident caused much indignation in the North, but Cadet Whittaker had to leave the Point, and thus the Army's loss was to become the Territory's gain.

After taking a law degree and practicing in South Carolina, Professor Whittaker became the principal of Douglass High School, where he was to introduce elements of West Point discipline and military style to young Oklahoma Negroes. Thus once again we have an example of the unnoticed logic of the democratic process.

I hope you will understand that I haven't mentioned this unpleasant incident just to shock you. I do so to suggest that our unknown history doesn't stop having consequences even though we ignore them, and I *am* trying to give you some idea of the scene and the political and social climate which led such people as Dr. Page and my parents from the southeastern part of the country to make a life out in the Old Territory. Geography is fate, and in moving west they were repeating a pattern begun by runaway slaves and by the Negroes who accompanied the Indian tribes along the death march which took so many lives that it became known as "The Trail of Tears," a march initiated by Andrew Jackson in ful llment of the treaty of Dancing Rabbit.

Thus it was that Dr. Page rst became a representative gure in the Territory and later in the new state, where we were very much aware that he was a graduate of Brown. It is understandable that this university occupies a warm place in our hearts, since we felt a tie to you through our principal. So it was that certain ideals which Dr. Page gained here, and certain testings of his manhood and faith which were a rmed here became a part of my own heritage as an Oklahoman. This came about through his role as educator, but there was a more important link between us, and this had to do with my introduction to the arts, and ultimately with my becoming a writer.

Dr. and Mrs. Page were the parents of a wonderful daughter whose name was Zelia N. Breaux, and her impact upon our community was in some ways as profound as that of her father. We

are now in the area of culture where we may see how the generation which came between Dr. Page's and my own functioned in structuring the cultural life of the then wild territory of Oklahoma—and I assure you that it was wild! Yes, but wild mainly in the sense of its being a relatively unformed frontier state. I have stressed that in this country geography has performed the role of fate, but it is important to remember that it is not geography alone which determines the quality of life and culture. These depend upon the courage and personal culture of the individuals who make their homes in any given locality.

In *The Oregon Trail*, Francis Parkman writes of his surprise at coming upon a snug little cottage, far on the other side of the great prairie, wherein he

discovered vintage French wines and the latest French novels. Well, those cultural artifacts didn't get there by magic; they were transported there to supply the cultural tastes of the cottage's owner. Thus they formed a cultural synthesis between the culture of France and that of the prairie. But of course such apparently incongruous juxtapositions are a norm on the frontiers of American society. Today most of the geographical frontier is gone, but the process of cultural integration continues along the lines that mark the hierarchal divisions of the United States.

Be that as it may, Mrs. Breaux was a musician and a teacher of music. By the time I entered the primary grades she was supervisor of music for Oklahoma City's Negro schools, and the connection between Mrs. Breaux and my presence here began in a second-grade classroom. At the time we were dancing and singing to a little nursery tune which went, "Oh, busy squirrel with bushy tail and shiny eyes so round / Why do you gather all the nuts that fall upon the ground." There were quite a number of us hopping about, but she must have been struck by the way this particular little nut was doing his squirrel act, because she gathered me up for special attention. So began one of the most important relationships in my life. For more than ten years Mrs. Breaux was a sort of second mother. Naturally, I had my own mother and I loved her very much, but between us there arose the usual con icts which a ect the relationships between parent and child, and when this happened

Mrs. Breaux was always there to be turned to. Better still, she was an agent of music, which soon became the main focus of my attempts to achieve my own identity.

This was during the 1920s, the period in which what was known as the Public School Music Program was sweeping the nation. Mrs.

Breaux was a leader in this movement which did so much to broaden and enrich the nation's musical culture. She did so by teaching musical theory and by training what became famous marching bands. She organized school orchestras and choral groups, she staged and directed operettas, and she was responsible for the high quality of our music-appreciation program. Thanks to her, ours became a music-centered culture which involved as many of the other arts as was possible in a system that was limited in budget and

facilities. On May Day children from all of the Negro schools were assembled on the playing eld of the old Western League baseball stadium, the girls in their white dresses and the boys in blue serge knickers and white shirts, and there, to the music of the Douglass High School Band, we competed in wrapping dozens of maypoles and engaged in mass dancing of a variety of European folk dances.

As was to be expected, there were those who found the sight of young Negroes dancing European folk dances absurd, if not comic, but their prejudiced eyes missed the point of this exercise in democratic education. In learning such dances, we were gaining an appreciation of the backgrounds and cultures of our fellow Americans whose backgrounds lay in Europe. Not only did it narrow the psychological distance between them and ourselves, but we saw learning their dances as an *artistic* challenge. While there were those who thought that we were stepping out of the role assigned Negroes and were expressing a desire to become white, we ignored them. For we knew that dancing such dances would no more alter our racial identity or social status than would our singing of Bach chorales.

Our interest lay in competing to master the steps, and our reward came in the form of a painless absorption of information which we might otherwise have found uninteresting. Thanks to Mrs. Breaux, we were being introduced to one of the most precious of American freedoms, which is our freedom to broaden our personal culture by

absorbing the cultures of others. Even more important was the fact that we were being taught to discover and exercise those elements of freedom which existed unobserved (at least by outsiders), within our state of social and political unfreedom. This gift, this important bit of equipment for living, came through the e orts of a woman educator who by acting as agent of the broader American culture was able to widen our sense of possibility and raise our aspirations.

Nor was this all, for while I was to become a writer instead of a musician, it was Mrs. Breaux who introduced me to the basic discipline required of the artist. It was she who made it possible for me to grasp the basic compatibility of the mixture of the classical and vernacular styles which were part of our musical culture. She was one of the owners of what for many years was the only Negro theater in Oklahoma City, and it was here that she made valuable contributions to the popular arts. While she discouraged her students from playing jazz, she also saw to it that our community was provided the best of Negro entertainers. In her Aldridge Theater one could see and hear the great blues singers, dancers and comedians, the famous jazz orchestras and such repertory drama groups as

the Lafayette Players. In other words, just as she taught Negro spirituals along with Bach and Handel, she provided a cultural nexus in which the vernacular art forms could be encountered along with the classical. Just as her father transmitted the ideals which he had gained at Brown University across the color line and down the annals of our unwritten history, so did his daughter bring together and make possible an interaction of art forms, styles and traditions. Interesting enough, it wasn't until years later that I learned how unusual this was, or the extent to which it cleared away the insidious confusion between race and culture which haunts this society.

Today we hear much discussion of what is termed "Black English," a concept unheard of during my school days. Yet we were all the grandchildren of slaves, and most of us spoke in the idioms that were native to the regions from which our families had migrated. Still, no one, much less our teachers, suggested that standard American English was beyond us; how could they, with

such examples as Dr. Page before us? He could make the language of Shakespeare and the King James version of the Bible resound within us in such ways that its majesty and beauty seemed as natural and as normal coming from one of our own as an inspired jazz improvisation or an eloquently sung spiritual. By daily examples he made us aware that great poetry and uent English were a part of our heritage; thus we developed an ear for a variety of linguistic idioms. And with so many other masters of America's nineteenth-century oratorical style—many of them preachers—

living among us, we had no di culty in grasping how elevated styles of speech related to the spoken vernacular. For example, as a boy I heard the debate team of Wiley College, which was coached by the late Afro-American poet Melvin Tolson, defeat the team of England's Oxford University, who did not disdain to debate with Negroes. Tolson's team was made up of young men whose backgrounds were similar to our own, and they appeared to have no di culty in mastering the King's English.

No, being of a people whose backgrounds were in slavery, we were taught that it was necessary to acquire the skills needed for communicating in a mixed society, and we knew from experience that this required a melting and blending of vernacular and standard speech and a grasp of the

occasions in which each, or both, were called for. Hence instead of clinging defensively to our native idiom, we sought consciously to extend its range. Actually, language was our most easily available toy, and we played with its capacity to create the unexpected and to blunt its capacity to surprise. The ever-present con ict of American linguistic styles was a source of comedy which sharpened our eye for the incongruous—a matter encouraged both by our condition as boys and as members of a group whose social situation was most ambiguous. Verbal comedy was a way of confronting social ambiguity. Being familiar with racial violence—

we were living in the aftermath of the race riots that followed World War I, remember—we learned quite early that laughter made the di culties of our condition a bit more bearable. We hadn't read Henry James at that time, but we realized nevertheless that American society contained a built-in joke, and we were aware,

even if James wasn't (or did not choose to admit), that this joke was in many ways centered in our condition. So we welcomed any play on words or nuance of gesture which gave expression to our secret sense of the way things really were. Usually this took the comic mode, and it is quite possible that one reason the popular arts take on an added dimension in our democracy lies in an unspoken, though no less binding, agreement that popular culture is not to be taken seriously. Thus the popular arts have become an agency through which Americans can contemplate those aspects of our experience that are deemed unspeakable.

Perhaps that is why it was left to such comedians as Redd Foxx to notify us that since the 1950s a major change has occurred in our attitudes toward racial minorities. Thus when he, a black comedian, makes remarks about ugly white women which once were reserved only for black women, he allows us to bring attitudes and emotions that were once tabooed into the realm of the rational, where, protected by the comic mode, we may confront our guilt and prejudices and perhaps resolve them.

Today I have heard some interesting discussions of the American vernacular style in literature, and found them most informative. It seems to me that our most characteristic American style *is* that of the vernacular. But by "vernacular" I mean far more than popular or indigenous language. I see the

vernacular as a dynamic *process* in which the most re ned styles from the past are continually merged with the play-it-by-eye-and-by-ear improvisations which we invent in our e orts to control our environment and entertain ourselves.

This is not only in language and literature, but in architecture and cuisine, in music, costume, and dance, and in tools and technology.

In it the styles and techniques of the past are adjusted to the needs of the present, and in its integrative action the high styles of the past are democratized. From this perspective the vernacular is, no less than the styles associated with aristocracy, a gesture toward perfection.

Which is to suggest that although the perfection toward which it moves is democratic rather than aristocratic, there is no necessary contradiction between our vernacular style and the pursuit of excellence. After all, “democracy” is our term for social perfection (or a perfect society), while “excellence” is a general term for perfect quality. And while the vernacular is shy of abstract standards, it still seeks perfection in the form of functional felicity.

That is why considerations of function and performance gure so prominently in the scale of vernacular aesthetics. Perfection is arrived at through a process of re nement, elimination and integration in which form and function become aesthetically one.

Today there is much discussion of a supposedly unresolvable con ict between elitist and populist values. But this assumes that the vernacular process destroys the so-called elitist styles, when in truth past standards of excellence remain to be used again and again, and indeed often undergo metamorphosis as they contribute to the needs of the present. In a sense jazz, which is an amalgam of past musical styles, may be seen as a rejection of a music which expressed the values of a social elite, but although jazz musicians are practitioners of a vernacular style, they are also unreconstructed elitists when it comes to maintaining the highest standards of the music which expresses their sense of the American experience. So was Mark Twain, who transformed elements of regional vernacular speech into a medium of uniquely American literary expression and thus taught us

how to capture that which is essentially American in our folkways and manners. Indeed, the vernacular process is a way of establishing and discovering our national identity.

But wherever we nd the vernacular process operating, we also nd individuals who act as transmitters between it and earlier styles, tastes and techniques. In the United States all social barriers are vulnerable to cultural styles. Therefore Dr. Page and Mrs. Breaux

—and there were many others, both white and black—worked to maintain high standards wherever they originated. They also tried to give their students a sense of the fact that as Americans, they too were heirs to the culture of all the ages. Their type of teaching was both an act of individual idealism and a ful llment of their faith in

democracy. It was also a great, if unrecognized, service to this nation; while preparing us for the next stage in our education, they were conditioning us to take advantage of such opportunities as the built-in logic of the democratic process would throw our way.

There was a time when a Negro singer of classical music was viewed as a mere exotic, so if you are surprised that there are now so many Afro-American opera and concert singers, I would remind you that it didn't happen accidentally. God didn't reach down and say, "All right, Leontyne Price, Shirley Verrett, Betty Allen, Jessye Norman, Simon Estes, you may now sing opera as well as your native Negro spirituals." No, this came about because there were agents of culture among us who embraced the ideals of art and found ways of imparting them to their students.

I am saying that within an area of our society which has been treated as though it were beyond the concerns of history, the democratic process has been made to operate by dedicated individuals—at least on the level of culture—and that it has thus helped to de ne and shape the quality of the general American experience. Which is something that those who were charged with making our ideals manifest on the political level were not doing. But fortunately, American culture is of a whole, for that which is essentially "American" in it springs from the synthesis of our diverse elements of cultural style. It is the product of a process which was in motion

even before the founding of this nation, and it began with the interaction between Englishmen, Europeans, and Africans and American geography. When our society was established, this

"natural" process of Americanization continued in its own unobserved fashion, defying the social, aesthetic and political assumptions of our political leaders and tastemakers alike. This, as I say, was the vernacular process, and in the days when our leaders still looked to England and the Continent for their standards of taste, the vernacular stream of our culture was creating itself out of whatever elements it found useful, including the Americanized culture of the slaves. In this sense the culture of the United States has always been more "democratic" and "American" than the social and political institutions in which it was emerging. Ironically, it was

the vernacular which gave expression to that very newness of spirit and outlook of which the leaders of the nation liked to boast. Such Founding Fathers as Franklin and Webster feared the linguistic vernacular as a disruptive in uence and sought to discourage it, but fortunately they failed, for otherwise there would have been no Mark Twain.

They failed because thanks to the pluralistic character of our society, there is no way for any one group to discover by itself the intrinsic forms of our democratic culture. This has to be a cooperative e ort, and it is achieved through contact and communication across our divisions of race, class, religion and region. In the past the cultural contributions of those who were con ned beneath the threshold of social hierarchy—which is to say outside the realm of history—were simply appropriated without credit by those who used them to their own advantage. But today we have reached a stage of general freedom in which it is no longer possible to take the products of a slave or an illiterate artist without legal consequence. Today the vernacular artist knows his own value, and thanks to our increased knowledge of our cultural pluralism, such artists are identi ed less by their race or social status than by the excellence of their art. Our awareness of what we are culturally is still inadequate, but the process of synthesis through which the slaves took the music and religious lore of others and combined them with their African heritage in such ways as to create their own cultural idiom continues. Through the democratizing action of the vernacular, almost any

style of expression may be appropriated, and today such appropriation continues at an accelerating pace. I must confess, however, that I nd some of its products incongruous, if not unexpected. As when I hear a group of middle-class white kids doing their best to sound like members of an old-fashioned black Baptist congregation. They would probably nd the churches in which such sounds are a form of religious exaltation bizarre, but I recognize that by appropriating the style—and profaning it, as it were—they are simply trying to attain some vague ideal of perfection. In this country it is in the nature of cultural styles to become detached from their places of origin, so it is possible that in

their frenzy the kids don't even realize that they are sounding like black Baptists. As Americans who are in uenced by the vernacular, it is natural for them to seek out those styles which provide them with a feeling of being most in harmony with the unde ned aspects of American experience. In other words, they're seeking the homeness of home.

In closing, let me say that our pluralistic democracy is a di cult system under which to live, our guarantees of freedom notwithstanding. Socially and politically we have yet to feel at ease with our principles, and on the level of culture no one group has managed to create the de nitive American style. Hence the importance of the vernacular in the ongoing task of naming, de ning and creating a consciousness of who and what we have come to be. Each American group has dominated some aspect of our corporate experience by reducing it to form; thus we might well make a conscious e ort to seek out and explore such instances of domination and make them our conscious possession. I say

"conscious" because in pursuing our democratic promises, we do this even when we are unaware. What is more, our unwritten history is always at work in the background to provide us with clues as to how this process of self-de nition has worked in the past.

Perhaps if we learn more of what has happened and *why* it happened, we will learn more of who we really are, and perhaps if we learn more about our unwritten history, we won't be so vulnerable to the capriciousness of events as we are today. In the process of becoming more aware of ourselves we will recognize that one of the functions of our vernacular culture is that

of preparing for the emergence of the unexpected, whether it takes the form of the disastrous or the marvelous. Such individuals as Dr. Page and his daughter worked, it seems to me, to such an end. Ultimately theirs was an act of faith: faith in themselves, faith in the potentialities of their own people, and despite their social status as Negroes, faith in the potentialities of the democratic ideal. Coming so soon after the betrayal of the Reconstruction, theirs was a heroic e ort. It is my good fortune that their heroism became my heritage, and thanks to Inman Page and Brown University it is also now a

part of the heritage of all Americans who would become conscious of who they are.

From *The Carleton Miscellany*, Winter 1980; address given September 20, 1979, at the Ralph Ellison Festival at Brown University.

An Extravagance of Laughter

IN December 1983 the good news that Erskine Caldwell had reached his eightieth birthday reminded me that although I have had the pleasure of seeing him on and o for some twenty years, I have never been able to o er him an apology for an o ense of which I was guilty back in the 1930s. Perhaps I failed because my o ense took the form of laughter—or, to be more precise, of a particular quality and an *extravagance* of laughter, which, since it came at the expense of Caldwell's most famous work of comedy, may explain both my confusion and my reluctance. Since the work in question was *designed* and intended to evoke laughter, any account of why I should term my particular laughter "o ensive" will require a bit of autobiographical exploration which may well enable me both to understand my failure to apologize and to clarify the role which that troublesome moment of laughter was to play in my emotional and intellectual development.

Charles Baudelaire observed, "The wise man never laughs but that he trembles." Therefore, for the moment let it su ce to say that being both far from wise and totally unaware of Baudelaire's warning, I not only laughed extravagantly but trembled even *as* I laughed, and thus I found myself utterly unprepared for the Caldwell-inspired wisdom which erupted from

that incongruous juxtaposition of mirth and quaking. This is no excuse, however, because Aesop and Uncle Remus have taught us that comedy is a disguised form of philosophical instruction, and especially when it allows us to glimpse the animal instincts operating beneath the surface of our civilized a ectations. For by allowing us to laugh at that which is normally *un* laughable, comedy provides an otherwise unavailable clari cation of vision that calms the clammy trembling which ensues whenever we pierce the veil of conventions that guard us from the basic absurdity of the human condition. During such

moments the world of appearances is turned upside down, and in my case Caldwell's comedy plunged me quite unexpectedly into the deepest levels of a most American realm of the absurd while providing me with the magical wings with which to ascend back to a world which, for all his having knocked it quite out of kilter, I then found more rational. Caldwell had no way of knowing what I was experiencing, but even though I caused unforeseen trouble, he was a wise and skillful guide, and thus it is that I o er him both my apologies and, for reasons to be made clear a bit later, my heartfelt thanks.

It all began in 1936, a few weeks after my arrival in New York, when I was lucky enough to be invited by an old hero and newfound friend, Langston Hughes, to be his guest at what would be my introduction to Broadway theater. I was so delighted and grateful for the invitation that I failed to ask my host the title of the play, and it was not until we arrived at the theater that I learned that it would be Jack Kirkland's dramatization of Erskine Caldwell's famous novel *Tobacco Road*. No less successful than in its original form, the play was well on its way to a record-breaking seven-year run in the theater, and that alone was enough to increase my expectations. So much so that I failed to note the irony of circumstance that would have as my introduction to New York theater a play with a Southern setting and characters that were based upon a type and class of whites whom I had spent the last three years trying to avoid. Had I been more alert, it might have occurred to me that somehow a group of white Alabama farm folk had learned of my presence in New York, thrown together a theatrical troupe, and own north to haunt me. But being dazzled by the lights, the theatrical atmosphere, the babble of the playgoing crowd, it didn't. Yet that irony

arose precisely from the mixture of motives—practical, educational, and romantic—that had brought me to the North in the rst place.

Among these was my desire to enjoy a summer free of the S outh and its problems while meeting the challenge of being on my own

for the rst time in a great Northern city. Fresh out of Alabama, with my junior year at Tuskegee Institute behind me, I was also in New York seeking funds with which to complete my nal year as a music major—a goal at which I was having less success than I had hoped. However, there had been compensations. Between working in the Harlem YMCA cafeteria as a substitute for vacationing waiters and countermen and searching for a more pro table job, I had used my free time exploring the city's many cultural possibilities, making new acquaintances, and enjoying the many forms of social freedom that were unavailable to me in Alabama. The very idea of being in New York was dreamlike, for like many young Negroes of the time, I thought of it as the freest of American cities, and considered Harlem as the site and symbol of Afro-American progress and hope. Indeed, I was both young and bookish enough to think of Manhattan as my substitute for Paris, and of Harlem as a place of Left Bank excitement. So now that I was there in its glamorous scene, I meant to make the most of its opportunities.

Yes, but I had discovered, much to my chagrin, that while I was physically out of the South, I was restrained—sometimes consciously, sometimes not—by certain internalized thou-shalt-nots that had structured my public conduct in Alabama. It was as though I had come to the Eden of American culture and found myself indecisive about which of its fruits were free for my picking. Thus, for all my bright expectations, my explorations had taken on certain aspects of an unanticipated and amorphous rite of initiation in which the celebrant—if indeed one existed—remained mute and beyond my range of ear and vision. Therefore I found myself forced to act as my own guide and instructor, and had to enact, touch-and-go, the archetypical American role of pioneer in what was our most sophisticated and densely populated city. In the process I found myself being compelled, as it were, to improvise a makeshift map of the city's racially determined do's-and-don'ts, and impose it upon the objective scene by dealing consciously with

such complications of character and custom as might materialize in the course of my explorations.

I missed, in brief, a sense of certainty which the South imposed in the forms of signs and symbols that marked the dividing lines of racial segregation. This was an embarrassing discovery, so given what I assumed would be the shortness of my visit, I tried to deal with it and remained eager to take the risks necessary to achieve New York's promises. After certain disappointments, however, I had been going about it in the manner of one learning to walk again upon a recently mended leg that still felt strange without the protective restraint of a plaster cast now left happily behind. So there were moments when I reminded myself of the hero of the old Negro folktale who, after arriving mistakenly in heaven and being issued a pair of wings, was surprised to learn that there were certain earth-like restrictions which required people of his complexion to y with one wing strapped to their sides. But while surprised, the new arrival came to the philosophical conclusion that even in heaven, that place of unearthly perfection, there had to be rules and regulations. And since rules were usually intended to make one think, no less than to provide guidance, he decided to forgo complaint and get on with the task of mastering the challenge of one-wing ying. As a result, he soon became so pro cient at the art that by the time he was cast out of heaven for violating its tra c regulations, he could declare (and so truthfully that not even Saint Peter could say him nay) that he was the most skillful one-winged yer ever to have been grounded by heavenly decision.

So, following the example of my legendary ancestor, I determined to master my own equivalent of one-winged ying in such a manner as to do the least violence to myself or to such arcane rules of New York's racial arrangements that I might encounter. Which meant that I would have to mask myself and confront its mysteries with a combination of uncertainty and daring. Thus it was that by the time I stumbled onto *Tobacco Road*, I had been nibbling steadily at the

"Big Apple" (which even in those days was the Harlemite's fond name for the city), and in the process had discovered more than an ambiguous worm or two. Nevertheless it should be remembered that worms teach small earthly truths even as serpents teach theology.

Beyond the borders of Harlem's brier patch—which seemed familiar because of my racial and cultural identi cation with the majority of its people and the lingering spell that had been cast nationwide by the music, dance and literature of the so-called Harlem Renaissance—I viewed New Yorkers through the overlay of my Alabama experience. Contrasting the whites I encountered with those I had observed in the South, I weighed class against class and compared Southern styles with their Northern counterparts. I listened to diction and noted dress, and searched for attitudes in in ections, carriage and manners.

In pursuing this aspect of my extracurricular education, I explored the landscape. I crossed Manhattan back and forth from river to river and up, down and around again, from Spuyten Duyvil Creek to the Battery, looking, listening and gadding about, rode streetcar and el, subway and bus, took a hint from Edna Millay and spent an evening riding back and forth on the Staten Island Ferry. For given my Oklahoma-Alabama perspective, even New York's forms of transportation were unexpected sources of education. From the elevated trains I saw my rst penthouses with green trees growing atop tall buildings, caught remote glimpses of homes, businesses and factories while moving above the teeming streets, and felt a sense of quiet tranquillity despite the bang and clatter.

Yes, but the subways were something else again. In fact, the subways were utterly confusing to my Southern-bred idea of good manners, and especially the absence of a certain gallantry that men were expected to extend toward women. Subway cars appeared to be underground arenas in which Northern social equality took the form of an endless shoving match in which the usual rules of etiquette were turned upside down—or so I concluded after watching a ve-o'clock foot race in a crowded car.

The contest was between a huge white woman who carried an armful of bundles, and a small Negro man who lugged a large suitcase. At the time I was standing against the track-side door, and when the train stopped at a downtown station I saw the two come charging through the opening doors like race horses leaving the starting gate at Belmont. As they spied and dashed for the single

empty seat, the outcome appeared up for grabs, but it was the woman, thanks to a bustling, more ruthless stride (and more subway know-how) who won—though only by a hip and a hair. Just as they reached the seat she swung a well-padded hip and knocked the man o stride, thus causing him to lose his balance as she turned, slipped beneath his reeling body, and plopped into the seat. It was a maneuver which produced a startling e ect, at least on me, for as she banged into the seat it caused the man to spin and land smack-dab in her lap—in which massive and heaving center of gravity he froze, stared into her face nose tip to nose, and then performed a springlike leap to his feet as from a red-hot stove. It was but the briefest conjunction, and then, as he reached down and fumbled for his suitcase, the woman began adjusting her bundles, and with an elegant toss of her head looked up into his face with the most ladylike and triumphant of smiles.

I had no idea of what to expect next, but to her sign of good sportswomanship the man let out an exasperated “Hell, you can have it, I don’t want it!” A response which evoked a phrase from an old forgotten ditty to which my startled mind added the unstated line—“Sleeping in the bed with your hand right on it”—and shook me with visions of the train screeching to a stop and a race riot beginning.

But not at all. While the defeated man pushed his way to another part of the car the crowd of passengers simply looked on and laughed. The interracial aspects of the incident, with its evocation of the naughty lyric, left me shaken, but I was learning something of the truth of what Henry James meant by the arduousness of being an American. This went double for a Tuskegee student who was trying to adjust to the New York underground. I never knew what to expect, because there appeared to be no agreed-upon rules of conduct. Indeed, in the subways the operating slogan appeared to be

“Every Man and Woman for Themselves.” Or perhaps it was “Hurray for Me and Phoo-phoo on You!” But *whatever* its operating principle, whenever I rode the subway trains something I had never seen before seemed fated to happen.

As during a trip in another crowded car when I found myself standing beside a Negro man who stood just in front of a seat that was about to be

vacated—when suddenly from his other side a woman decided to challenge him for its possession. This time, however, it was the man who won, for in a ash he folded his arms, dropped into the posture of a Cossack dancer, and was in the seat before the woman could make her move. Then, as she grabbed a handhold and glared down into his face, he restored something of my sense of reality by saying, “Madam, all you had to do was risk the slight possibility that I just *might* be a gentleman. Because if you had, I would have been *compelled* to step aside.” Then, opening a copy of *The Wall Street Journal*, he proceeded to read.

But for all their noise and tension, it was not the subways that most intrigued me. Although a pleasant way to explore the city, my rides in New York buses soon aroused questions about matters that I had hoped to leave behind. Yet the very fact that I encountered little on Northern buses that was distressing allowed me to face up to a problem which had puzzled me down South: the relationship between Southern buses and racial status. In the South you occupied the back of the bus, and nowhere *but* the back, or so help you God.

So being in the North and encouraged by my anonymity, I experimented by riding all *over* New York buses, excluding only the driver’s seat—front end, back end, right side, left side, sitting or standing as the route and ow of passengers demanded. *And*, since those were the glorious days of double-deckers, both enclosed and open, I even rode *topside*.

Thus having convinced myself that no questions of racial status would be raised by where I chose to ride, I asked myself whether a seat in the back of the bus wasn’t actually more desirable than one in the front. Not only did it provide more legroom, but it o ered a more inclusive perspective on both the interior and exterior scenes. I found the answer obvious and quite amusing, but then, as though to raise to consciousness more serious questions that I had too long ignored, the buses forced a more troubling contradiction upon my

attention. Now that I was no longer forced by law and compelled by custom to ride in the back and to surrender my seat to any white who demanded it, what was more desirable: the possibility of exercising what was routinely accepted in the North as an abstract, highly symbolic (even trivial) form of

democratic freedom, or the creature comfort which was to be had by occupying a spot from which more of the passing scene could be observed? In my own personal terms, what was more important, my own individual comfort, or the exercise of the democratic right to be squeezed and jostled by strangers? The highly questionable privilege of being touched by anonymous whites—not to mention reds, browns, blacks, and yellows—or the minor pleasure a orded by having a maximum of breathing space? Such questions were akin to that of whether you lived in a Negro neighborhood because you were forced to do so, or because you preferred living among those of your own background. Which was easy to answer, because having experienced life in mixed neighborhoods as a child, I preferred to live where people spoke my own version of the American language, and where misreadings of tone or gesture were less likely to ignite lethal con ict. Segregation laws aside, this was a matter of personal choice, for even though class and cultural di erences existed among Negroes, it was far easier to deal with hostilities arising between yourself and your own people than with, say, Jeeter Lester or, more realistically, Lester Maddox. And this even though I would have found it far better to be Lestered by Jeeter than mattock-handled by Maddox, that most improbable governor of a state that I had often visited!

But my interrogation by the New York scene (for that is what it had become) was not to stop there, for once my mind got rolling on buses, it was di cult to stop and get o . So I became preoccupied with de ning the di erence between Northern and Southern buses.

Of the two, New York buses were simpler, if only for being earthbound. They were merely a form of transportation, an in ated version of a taxicab or passenger car which one took to get from one locality to another. As far as one’s destination and motives were concerned, they were neutral. But this was far from true of Southern

buses; when compared with its New York counterparts, even the most dilapidated of Southern buses seemed (from my New York perspective) to be a haunted form of transportation.

A Southern bus was a contraption contrived by laying the South’s social pyramid on its side, knocking out a few strategic holes, and rendering it

vehicular through the addition of engine, windows and wheels. Thus converted, with the sharp apex of the pyramid blunted and equipped with fare box and steering gear, and its sprawling base curtailed severely and narrowly aligned (and arrayed with jim crow signs), a ride in such a vehicle became, at least for Negroes, as unpredictable as a trip in a spaceship doomed to be caught in the time warp of history, that man-made "fourth dimension" which always confounds our American grasp of "real" or *actual* time or duration.

For blacks and whites alike, Southern buses were places of hallucination, but especially for Negroes, because once inside, their journey ended even before the engine red and the wheels got rolling. Then, as with a "painted ship upon a painted ocean," the engine chugged, the tires scu ed, and the scenery outside ashed and ickered, but they themselves remained, like Zeno's arrow, forever in the same old place. Thus the motorized mobility of the social pyramid did little to advance the Negroes' e ort toward equality. Although they were allowed to enter the section that had been (in its vertical con guration) its top, any semblance of upward mobility ended at the fare box—from whence, once their fares were deposited, they were sent forthwith straight to the rear, or horizontalized bottom. Along the way almost anything could happen, from push to shove, assaults on hats, heads or aching corns, to unprovoked tongue-lashings from the driver or from any white passenger, drunk or sober, who took exception to their looks, attitude or mere existence. Nor did the perils of this haunted, gauntletlike passage end at the back of the bus. Often it was so crowded that there was little breathing space, and since the segregated passengers were culturally as "Southern" as the whites, the newcomer might well encounter a few contentious Negroes who would join in the assault—if only because he appeared uneasy in his

command of the life-preserving "cool" which protected not only the individual Negro but each member of the group in his defenseless, nonindividualized status. In brief, all were faceless nobodies caught up in an endless trip to nowhere—or so it seemed to me in my Northern sanctuary.

For even as the phantomized bus went lurching and fuming along its treadmill of a trajectory, the struggle within scu ed and raged in tful retrograde. Thus, as it moved without moving, those trapped inside played out their roles like gures in dreams, with one group ever forcing the other to the backmost part, and the other ever watching and waiting as they bowed to force and clung to sanity.

Indeed, the time would come when such bus enscened pantomime would erupt in a sound and fury of action that would engulf the South and change American society. Most surprising and yet most ttingly, it would begin when a single tired Negro woman refused to go on with what had now become an unbearable farce. Then would come re and gunshot, cattle prods and attack dogs, but the enchantment would end, and at last the haunted bus would shift gears and move on to the road of reality and toward the future.

But of this I had no way of knowing at the time. I only knew that Southern bus rides had the power to haunt and confuse my New York passage. Moreover, they were raising an even more troublesome question: to what extent had I failed to grasp a certain degree of freedom that had always existed in my group's state of unfreedom? Of what had I neglected to avail myself through fear or lack of interest while sitting silently behind jim crow signs? After all, a broad freedom of expression within restrictions could be heard in jazz and seen in sports, and this freedom was made movingly manifest in religious worship. There was an Afro-American dimension in Southern culture, and the lives of many black Southerners possessed a certain verve and self-possessed fullness, so to what extent had I overlooked similar opportunities for self-discovery while accepting a de nition of possibility laid down by those who would deny me freedom?

Thus, while I enjoyed my summer, such New York-provoked questions made for a certain unease which I tried to ignore.

Nevertheless they made me aware that whatever its true shape turned out to be, Northern freedom could be grasped only by my running the risk of the unknown and by acting in the face of uncertainty. Which meant that I would have to keep moving into racially uncharted areas. Otherwise I would remain physically in Harlem and psychologically in Alabama—neither of which was acceptable. Harlem was "Harlem," a dream place of glamour

and excitement—what with its music, its dance, its style. But it was all of this because it was a part of (and *apart from)* the larger city.

Harlem, I came to feel, was the shining transcendence of a national negative, and it took its fullest meaning from that which it was not, and without which I would have regarded it as less interesting than, say, Kansas City, Missouri or South Side Chicago. Harlem, whose ironic inhabitants described it a thousand times a day as being

"nowhere," took much of its meaning from the larger metropolis, so I could only achieve the fallest measure of its attractions by experiencing that which it was not. Which meant, in the broadest sense, that I would have to use Harlem as a base and standard of measurement from which to pursue, in all its plenitude, that which was denied me in the South. In brief, if I were to grasp American freedom, I was compelled to continue my explorations of downtown Manhattan.

Yes, but as I say, my explorations of the city were rendered uncertain by the ongoing con ict between the past and the present as they existed within me: between the dream in my head and the murky, seek-and-fìnd-it shiftings of the New York scene; between the confounding complexity of America's racial arrangements as they coincided and di ered according to the customs, laws, and values fostered by both North and South. I still clung to the Southern Negro's conception of New York as the freest of American cities, but although now far removed from the geographical region where old-time things are de antly not forgotten, I was learning that even here, where memories of the past were deliberately repressed, if not forgotten, the past itself continued to shape

perceptions and attitudes. It appeared that for some New Yorkers, I *myself* constituted a living symbol of that complexity of American experience which they had never known, and a disquieting reminder of their involvement in certain unsavory aspects of America's social reality that they preferred to ignore.

Yet given my persistent questioning, how could they? For I, who was an unwilling and not always conscious embodiment of that historical complexity, and a symbol of the Civil War's sacri cial bloodshed, kept

showing up in areas of culture where few of my people were to be seen. Thus in my dark singularity I often appeared to be perceived more as a symbol than as an individual, more as a threatening sign (a dark cloud no larger than a human hand, but somehow threatening) than as a disinterested seeker after culture. This made for problems because I had no way of anticipating the response to my presence.

Prior to stumbling onto *Tobacco Road* (at which I shall presently arrive), I had already encountered some of the complexity evoked by my probings. As the guest of a white female friend who reported musical events for a magazine, I had occupied a seat in the orchestra section of Carnegie Hall without inciting protest. But shortly thereafter I had been denied admission to a West Side cinema house that featured European movies. Then I had learned that while one mid-town restaurant would make you welcome, in another (located in Greenwich Village, Harlem's twin symbol of Manhattan's freedom), the waiters would go through the polite motions of seating you but then ll your food with salt. Then, to make certain that you got the message, they would enact a rite of exorcism in which the glasses and crockery, now considered hopelessly contaminated by your touch, were enfolded in the tablecloth and smithereened in the replace.

Or again, upon arriving at a Central Park West apartment building to deliver a music manuscript for the Tuskegee composer William L.

Dawson, you encountered a doorman with a European accent who was so rude that you were tempted to break his nose. Fortunately you didn't, for after you refused to use the servant's elevator he rang

up the tenant into whose hands alone you were instructed to make the delivery, Jacques Gordon of the Gordon String Quartet, who hurried down and invited you up to his apartment. Where, to your surprise and delight, he talked with you without condescension about his recordings, questioned you sympathetically about your musical background, and encouraged you in your ambitions to become a composer. So if you weren't always welcome to break bread in public places, an interest in the arts *could* break down social distance and allow for communication that was uninhibited by questions of race—or so it seemed.

As on a Madison Avenue bus when an enthusiastic, bright-eyed little old Jewish lady, fresh from an art exhibition with color catalogue in hand, would engage you in conversation and describe knowingly the styles and intentions of French painters of whom you'd never heard.

"Then you must go to galleries," she insisted.

"Stir yourself and go to museums," she demanded.

"This is one of the world's great centers of art, so learn about them! Why are you waiting? Enough already!" she exhorted.

And eventually, God bless her, I did.

But then, on another bus ride, a beautifully groomed and expensively dressed woman would become o ended when you retrieved and attempted to return the section of a newspaper that she had dropped when preparing to depart, apparently mistaking what was intended as an act of politeness for a reprimand from a social inferior. Hence it appeared that in New York one had to choose the time, place and person even when exercising one's Southern good manners.

On the other hand, it soon became clear that one could learn the subtleties of New York's racial manners only by being vulnerable and undiscriminating oneself, an attitude which the vast anonymity of the great metropolis encouraged. Here the claustrophobic provincialism which marked, say, Montgomery, Alabama, of that period, was absent, but one had to be on guard because reminders of the South could spring up from behind the most unlikely façades.

Shopping for a work of T. S. Eliot's in a 59th Street bookstore, I struck up a conversation with a young City College student who turned out to share my literary interests, and in recounting an incident of minor embarrassment having to do with my misinterpretation of a poetic trope, I used the old cliché "And was my face red"—whereupon, between the utterance and the reality, the idea I intended to convey and my stereotype phrase, there fell the shadow of things I sought to forget.

“What do you mean by ‘red’?” he said, impaling me upon the points of his smirking stare. “What you *really* mean is ‘ashes of roses’!”

Suddenly I was slapped into a conscious awareness of certain details of his presence that my eyes had registered, but to which, in the context of our exchange, my brain had attached no special signi cance. Intent upon sharing his ideas of Eliot, I had seen only that which I wished to see, but now, out of the eyes of my past, I saw that our di erences of background and religion were imprinted upon his face no less indelibly than mine upon my own. To my Southern-trained ear the echo of his trace of accent became ampli ed, the slight kink in his hair sprang into focus, and his nose evoked superimposed images of the Holy Land and Cyrano.

I didn’t like it, but there it was—I had been hit in mid ight—so, brought down to earth, I joined in his laughter. But while he laughed in bright major chords I responded darkly in minor-sevenths and atted-fths, and I doubted that he was attuned to the deeper source of our inharmonic harmony. How could he know that when a child in Oklahoma, I had played with members of his far-ung tribe and thus learned in friendly games of mutual insult the hoary formulae with which to make him squirm? But why bother?

Out of some obscure need a stranger had chosen to de ne to his own advantage that which was at best a eeting relationship, perhaps because I had left an opening that was irresistible. Or perhaps he saw my interest in poetry as an invasion of his special turf, which had to be repelled with a reminder of my racial status.

What right had *I* to be interested in Eliot, even though the great

poet had written of himself as having been “a small boy with a nigger drawl”?

Or was he implying that I was trying verbally to pass for white? If so, wasn’t that to confuse words with reality, and a metaphor with the thing or condition it named? Didn’t he realize that there might be as much of irony in one of his background embracing Eliot as he seemed to nd in my doing so? And how take poetry seriously if he himself would limit the range of

metaphor, that indispensable linguistic device for making unities of diversities?

This chance encounter left me a bit disenchanted, but also consciously aware of certain vague assumptions which I held concerning racial relations that I would nd in the North. I had hoped that in New York there would exist generally a type of understanding which obtained in the South between certain individual whites and Negroes. This was a type of Southern honor that did little to alter the general system of inequity, but it allowed individual whites to make exceptions in exerting the usual gestures of white supremacy. Such individuals refused to use racial epithets and tried, within the limitations of the system, to treat Negroes fairly. This was a saving grace and a balm to the aches and pains of the South's endless racial contention.

Thus I had assumed that in the North there would exist a general understanding between outsiders of whatever color or background, and that all would observe a truce or convention through which they would shun insults that focused on race, religion or physical appearance, entities that were inherited, and about which all were powerless to modify or change. (At that time I was unaware that there were whites who passed themselves o as being of other backgrounds.) Yet I realized that except for those rare Southern examples, there was no rm base for my expectations. I knew from the days of the minstrel shows to the musicals and movies then current, that many non-Negro outsiders had reaped fame and fortune by assuming the stereotyped mask of blackness. I also knew that our forms of popular culture, from movies to comic strips, were a source of a national mythology in which Negroes were the chief scapegoats, and that the function of this mythology was to allow

whites a more secure place (if only symbolically) in American society. Only years later would I learn that during periods of intense social unrest, even sensitive intellectuals who had themselves been victims of discrimination would nd it irresistible to use their well-deserved elevation to the upper levels of their professions as platforms from which, in the name of the most abstract and fashionable philosophical ideas, to reduce Negroes to stereotypes that were no less reductive and demeaning than those employed

by the most ignorant and bigoted white Southerners. Fortunately this knowledge was still in the future, and so, doing unto another as I would have had him do unto me, I dismissed my chance acquaintance as an insecure individual, and not the representative of a group or general attitude. But he did serve as a warning that if I wished to communicate with New Yorkers, I must watch my metaphors, for here one man's cliché was another man's facile opportunity for victimage.

So I was learning that exploring New York was a journey without a map, Baedeker or Henry James, and that how one was received by the natives depended more upon how one presented oneself than upon any ironclad rule of exclusion. Here the portals to many places of interest were guarded by hired help, and if you approached with uncertain mien, you were likely to be turned away by anyone from doormen to waiters to ticket agents. However, if you acted as though you were in fact a New Yorker exercising a routine freedom, chances were that you would be accepted. Which is to say that in many instances I found that my air and attitude could o set the inescapable fact of my color. It seemed that in the hustle and bustle of that most theatrical of American cities, one was accepted on the basis of what one *appeared* to be. This involved risks to one's self-esteem, not to mention the discipline demanded by a constant state of wariness.

But W. B. Yeats reminded us that "There is a relation between personal discipline and the theatrical sense, [and that] if we cannot imagine ourselves as di erent from what we are and assume the second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves, though we may accept one from others." He also advised us that "Active

virtue, as distinct from the passive acceptance of a current code, is the wearing of a mask."

At the time I was unaware of Yeats's observation, but if I had been so fortunate, I would have applied it to my own situation by changing his "we" to "an Afro-American," his "what we are" to

"what many whites assume an American Negro to be," and his

“current code” to “prevailing racial attitudes.” But with his contention that the assertion of a second self is to assume a mask, and that to do so is “the condition of an arduous full life,” I would have agreed wholeheartedly. In e ect, I was attempting to act out a self-elected role and to improvise into being a “second self” that I strongly felt but vaguely visualized. Although I was nding life far from full, I was certainly nding it arduous.

In Yeats’s sense, “masking” is more than the adoption of a disguise. Rather it is a playing upon possibility, a strategy through which the individual projects a self-elected identity and makes of himself a “work of art.” In my case it was a means of discovering the dimensions and cost of Northern freedom. In his critical biography *Yeats: The Man & the Masks*, Richard Ellman notes that the great Irish poet was writing about himself, but his theory nevertheless applies to the problematic nature of American identity.

While all human societies are “dramatic”—at least to the extent that, as Kenneth Burke points out, the members of all societies

“enact roles … change roles … participate … [and] develop modes of social appeal”—the semi-open structure of American society, with its many opportunities for individual self-transformation, intensi es the dramatic element by increasing the possibilities for both cooperation and con ict. It is a swiftly changing society in which traditional values are ever under attack, even as they are exploited by individuals and group alike. And with its upward—yes, and *downward*—mobility and its great geographical space, masking (which includes speech and costume as well as pose and posture) serves the individual as a means of projecting that aspect of his social self which seems useful in a given situation.

Such a state of a airs encourages hope and con dence in those who are not assigned and restricted to predesignated roles in the

hierarchal drama of American society. Melville has great fun with the comic aspects of this situation in *The Con dence Man*. To an extent, and for an endless variety of motives—benign or malignant, competitive or cooperative, creative and/or destructive—the

“American” is a selfcon dent man or woman who is engaged in projecting a second self and dealing with the second selves of others. The American creed of democratic equality encourages the belief in a second chance that is to be achieved by being born again

—and not simply in the afterlife, but here and now, on earth.

Change your name and increase your chances. Create by an act of immaculate self-conception an autobiography like that which transformed James Gatz into “Jay Gatsby.” Alter the shape of your nose, tint of skin, or texture of hair. Change your sexual identity by dress or by surgery. “Get thee to boutique and barbershop and *Unisex* thyself,” the ads exhort us, for anything is possible in pursuit of the second self. It sounds fantastic, but the second self’s hope for a second chance has now been extended even beyond the limits of physical death, thanks to the ability of medical science to transplant hearts, lungs and kidneys. Are you dissatis ed with your inherited self? Your social status? Then have a change of heart and associate with those of a di erent kidney!

College boy, thy courage muster,

Shave o that Fuzzy

Cookie duster—

Use Burma Shave!

So to enjoy the wonders of New York, I assumed a mask which I conceived as that of a “New Yorker,” and decided to leave it to those whites who might object to seek out the questioning Tuskegeian who was hidden behind the mask.

But a famous poet had invited me to see *Tobacco Road*, and suddenly, there in the darkness of a Broadway theater, I was snatched back to rural Alabama and, before I realized what was happening, I had blown my cover.

Not that the likes of Jeeter Lester and his family were new to me.

As a Tuskegee student I had often seen them in Macon County, Alabama, but in that setting their capacity for racial violence would have been far more overwhelming than their comical wrongheadedness. Indeed, in look, gesture and deed they had crowded me so continuously that I had been tempted to armor myself against their threat by denying them *their* humanity as they sought to deny me mine. Hence in my mind I assigned them to a limbo beneath the threshold of basic humanity.

Which was one of the Southern Negroes' strategies for dealing with poor whites, and an attitude given expression in the child's jingle:

My name is Ran,

I work in the sand, but

I'd rather be a nigger

Than a poor white man.…

But while such boasting brags—and there were others *(These white folks think they so ne But their raggedy drawers Stink just like mine* is another)—provided a release of steam, they were not only childish but ultimately frustrating. For if such sentiments were addressed directly, their intended targets could prove dangerous.

Thus the necessity for keeping one's negative opinions of whites within one's own group became a life-preserving discipline. One countered racial provocation by cloaking one's feelings in that psychologically inadequate equivalent of a plaster cast—or bulletproof vest—known as "cool." I had read Hemingway's de nition, but for Negroes, "grace under pressure" was far less a gauge of courage than of good common sense. The provocative words of whites were intended to goad one *beyond* words and into the area of physical violence. But while sticks and stones broke bones, mere words could be dismissed by considering their source and keeping a cool eye on the odds arrayed against one. So when racial epithets ew, we reminded ourselves that our mission was not that of proving our courage to any mouthy white who sought to

provoke us, but to stay alive and pursue our education. Coolness helped to keep our values warm, and racial hostility stoked our res of inspiration. But even for students protected by a famous campus, this was an arduous discipline, and one which obviated any superstitious Overevaluation of whiteness.

Nevertheless I tried, as I say, to avoid the class of whites from which Erskine Caldwell drew the characters of *Tobacco Road*. During the summer of 1933, while hoboing to Tuskegee, I had been hustled o a freight train by railroad detectives in the rail yards of Decatur, Alabama. This was at a time when the town and surrounding countryside were undergoing a siege of lynch fever stirred up by the famous trial in which the Scottsboro boys were charged with the rape of two white girls on a freight train. I escaped unharmed, but the incident returned to mind whenever I went traveling. Therefore I gave Jeeter Lester types a wide berth, but found it impossible to avoid them entirely because many were law-enforcement o cers who served on the highway patrols with a violent zeal like that which Negro slave narratives ascribed to the “paterollers” who had guarded the roads during slavery. (As I say, Southern buses were haunted, and so in a sense were Southern roads and highways.) This was especially true of a section of the route between Tuskegee and Columbus, Georgia. I traveled it frequently, both as a member of a jazz orchestra and when on pleasure trips to Columbus.

It was on such travels that I was apt to relive my Decatur experience. By a fateful circumstance of geography the forty-mile route passed through Phenix City, Alabama, then a brawling speed-trap of a town through which it was impossible to drive either slow enough or fast enough to satisfy the demands of its tra c policemen. No one, black or white, escaped their scrutiny, but since Tuskegee students were regarded as on their way to becoming

“uppity educated nigras,” we were especially vulnerable. The police lay in wait for us, clocked our speed by a standard known only to themselves, and used any excuse to delay and harass us. Usually they limited themselves to nes and verbal abuse, but I was told that the year before I arrived the police

had committed an act that had caused great indignation on campus and become the inspiration

of much bull-session yarn-spinning. On that occasion, I was told, two Phenix City policemen had stopped a carload of Tuskegee students and learned during the course of routine questioning that one of the group, a very black-skinned young man, bore the surname of “Whyte”—and then, as one of my informants said, “It was shame on him!”

When Whyte uttered his name the cops stared, exchanged looks of mock disbelief, and became red-faced with manic inspiration.

“Damn, boy,” one of them said, “y’all been drinking?”

“No, sir,” Whyte said.

“Well, now, I don’t know about that,” the cop said, “ ’cause you sho sound drunk to *me.”*

“No, sir,” Whyte said. “Because I don’t drink.”

“You sho?”

“Yes, sir!”

Then the cop turns to his buddy and says, “What you think, Lonzo? Is he drunk, or am I mistaken?”

“Well, now, if you want my opinion,” the other cop said, “he’s either drunk or something very serious is wrong with him. Yes, suh, something *serious* is wrong with this boy.”

“Why is that, Lonzo?” the rst cop said.

“ ’Cause it stands to reason that there’s no way in the *world* for a nigra as black as that to pretend that his name is ‘White.’ Not unless he’s blind-staggers drunk or else plum out of his nappy-headed, cotton-pickin’ mind!”

“That’s *my* exact opinion,” the rst cop said. “But lets us give ‘im another chance. So now once agin, boy, what is your last name?”

“O cer, it’s Whyte,” Whyte said. “That’s the truth and I’ll swear to it.”

That’s when the other cop, ol’ Longo, *he* takes over. He frowns at Whyte and shakes his head like he’s dealing with a *very* sad case.

Naturally he’s a big potbellied mother who chews Brown Mule tobacco.

“Damn, boy,” he says (in what proved to be a long-range prediction of then unimaginable things to come), “if we let you git away with a damn lie like that, next thing we know that ol’

Ramblin’ Wreck over at Georgia Tech’ll have a goddamn nigra *engineer!* Now, you think about that and let’s have that name agin!”

“But, O cer,” Whyte said, “Whyte’s the only last name I have.”

Then my informant, a sergeant in the ROTC and student of veterinary medicine, said, “The battle was *on!”* He described how with simulated indignation the policemen forced Whyte to pronounce his name again and again while insisting that they simply couldn’t believe that such a gross misnaming was possible, especially in the South, and gave a detailed account of the policemen’s reactions.

“Man,” he said, “they went after Whyte like he had insulted their mammas! And when he still wouldn’t deny his name, they came down on him like he was responsible for all the fuckup [meaning the genetic untidiness and confusion of black and white nomenclature] of Southern history!”

“Then, man,” another informant broke in, “those crackers got so damn disgusted with ol’ Whyte that every time he said his name, the ignorant bastards tried to dot where they thought an ‘i’ should have been by pounding his head with their blackjacks. They did everything but shoot that cat!”

“That’s right, cousin,” someone else said, “they made him whisper his name and they made him shout it. They made him write it down on a pad and then they made him spell it out—and I mean out *loud!*

And when he spelled it with a ‘y’ instead of an ‘I’ they swore he was lying and trying to be smart, and really went up side his head!”

“Yeah, man,” my original informant said, “and when Whyte still wouldn’t change his statement, they made him give the names of his mother and father, his granddaddys and grandmammas on both sides and their origins in slavery, present whereabouts, police records, and occupations—”

“That’s right, cousin, and since ol’ Whyte came from a very large family and the cops were putting all that pressure on him, the poor cat sounded like a country preacher scatting out the ‘begats’ from the Book of Genesis—Damn!”

Then it was back to Whyte’s o ensive surname, and the head-whipping sounded, in the words of another informant, a music

major and notorious prevaricator, “like somebody beating out the *Anvil Chorus* on a coconut!”

“Yeah, cousin, but what really made the bastards mad was that ol’

Whyte wouldn’t let some crackers beat him out of his name!”

“Oh, yes, and you have to give it to him. That Whyte was a damn good man!”

Finally, tired of the hazing and defeated in their e ort to make Whyte deny his heritage, the cops knocked him senseless and ordered his friends to place him in the car and get out of town.

Although obviously exaggerated in the telling, it was a nasty incident. However, my point is not its violence, but the contradiction between its ine ectiveness as intimidation while serving as a theme for a tall-tale improvisation. Thus was violence transcended with cruel but homeopathic

laughter, and racial cruelty transformed by a traditional form of folk art. It did nothing to change the Phenix City police, and probably wouldn't have even if they had heard the recitation. They continued to make life so uncertain that each time we reached Columbus and returned safely to Tuskegee, it was as though we had passed through re and emerged, like the mythical phoenix bird (after which, presumably, the town was named), from the ames. Still, we continued to risk the danger, for such was our eagerness for the social life of Columbus—the pleasure of parties, dances and picnics in the company of pretty girls—that we continued to run the gauntlet.

But it didn't cancel out the unpleasantness or humiliation. Thus, back on campus we were compelled to bu er the pain and negate the humiliation by making grotesque comedy out of the extremes to which whites would go to keep us in what they considered to be our

"place." Once safe at Tuskegee, we would become almost hysterical as we recounted our adventures and laughed as much at ourselves as at the cops. We mocked their modes of speech and styles of intimidation, and teased one another as we parodied our various modes of feigning fear when telling them who we were and where we were headed. It was a wild, he-man, schoolboy silliness, but the only way we knew for dealing with the inescapable conjunction of laughter and pain. My problem was that I couldn't completely

dismiss such experiences with laughter. I brooded and tried to make sense of it beyond that provided by our ancestral wisdom. That a head with a few knots on it was preferable to a heart with bullets through it was obviously true. If the philosopher's observation that absolute power corrupts absolutely was also true, then an absolute power based on mere whiteness made for a dei cation of madness.

Depending on the circumstance, whiteness might well be a sign of evil, of a "motiveless malignancy" which was to be avoided as much as strange dogs in rabid weather.

But you were surrounded by whiteness, and it was far from secure in its power. It thrived on violence and sought endlessly for victims, and in its hunger to enforce racial discrimination it was indiscriminating about its

victims. It didn’t care whether its victims were guilty or innocent, for guilt lay not in individual acts of wrongdoing but in nonwhiteness, in Negroness. Whiteness was a form of manifest destiny which designated Negroes as its territory and challenge. Whiteness struck at signs, at coloration, hair texture and speech idiom, and thus denied you individuality. How then avoid it, when history and geography brought it always in juxtaposition with blackness? How escape it when it asserted itself in law, in the layout of towns, the in ections of voices, the nuances of manners, the quality of mercy, justice, and charity? When it raged at interracial sex, but then violated its own values in the manner of Senator Bilbo (the name means “shackle”), who was said to nd sexual satisfaction only with Negro prostitutes? How escape it when it violated its own most sacred principles, both in spirit and in law, while converting the principles of democracy by which we sought to live into their opposites?

Considered soberly and without the consolation of laughter, it was mad, surreal, and further complicated by the fact that not all whites abhorred Negroes. The evil expressed itself most virulently in the mass and appeared to be regional, a condition of place and climate, since most whites who supported the school were Northerners who appeared for a few days in spring and then departed. Moreover, since not even all white Southerners were hostile, you always had to make ne distinctions between individuals, just as you had to

distinguish between the scenes and circumstances in which you encountered them. Your safety demanded a careful attention to detail and mood of social scene, because you had to avoid even friendly whites when they were in the company of their fellows, because it was in crowds that the hate, fear, and blood madness took over. When it did, it could transform otherwise friendly whites into mindless members of mobs. Most of all, you must avoid them when women of their group were present. When a Negro male came into view, the homeliest white woman became a goddess, a cult gure dei ed in the mystique of whiteness, a being from whom a shout or cry or expression of hand or eye could unleash a rage for human sacri ce. When the ignorant, torch-bearing armies assembled by night, black men burned in the re of white men’s passions.

If all of this seems long ago and far away, it is worth remembering that the past, as William Faulkner warned, is never past. Nor are its social and political consequences guaranteed to be limited to a single geographical area. The past emerges no less in the themes and techniques of art than in the contentions of politics, and since art (and especially the art of the Depression period) is apt to be in uenced by politics, it is necessary at this point to take a backward glance at my Tuskegee student's perception, admittedly immature and subjective, of Southern society as it in uenced my reaction to *Tobacco Road*.

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In the South of that day the bottom rung of the social ladder was reserved for that class of whites who were looked down upon as

"poor white trash," and the area immediately beneath them and below the threshold of upward social mobility was assigned to Negroes, whether educated or ignorant, prosperous or poor. But although they were barely below the poor whites in economic status (and were sometimes better o), it was the Negroes who were designated the South's untouchable caste. As such, they were perceived as barely controllable creatures of untamed instincts, and a group against whom all whites were obligated to join in the e ort

required for keeping them within their assigned place. This mindless but widely held perception was given doctrinal credibility through oppressive laws and an endless rhetorical reiteration of anti-Negro stereotypes. Negroes were seen as ignorant, cowardly, thieving, lying, hypocritical and superstitious in their religious beliefs and practices, morally loose, drunken, lthy of personal habit, sexually animalistic, rude, crude and disgusting in their public conduct, and aesthetically just plain unpleasant. If a few were not, it was due to the presence of "white" blood, a violation of the Southern racial code which rendered mixed-bloods especially dangerous and repugnant.

In brief, Negroes were considered guilty of all the seven deadly sins except the sin of pride, and were seen as a sometimes comic but nevertheless threatening negative to the whites' idealized image of themselves. Most

Negroes were characterized, in the jargon of sociology, by a “high visibility” of pigmentation which made the group easily distinguishable from other citizens, and therefore easy to keep in line and politically powerless. This powerlessness was justi ed and reinforced by the stereotypes, which denied blacks individuality and allowed any Negro to be interchangeable with any other. Thus, as far as many whites were concerned, not only were blacks faceless, but this facelessness made the idea of mistaken identity meaningless, and the democratic assumption that Negro citizens should share the individual’s recognized responsibility for the welfare of society was regarded as subversive.

In this denial of personality (sponsored by both law and custom), anti-Negro stereotypes served as an e cient and easily manipulated instrument of governance. Moreover, they prepared Negroes for the role of sacri cial scapegoat in the ritual drama of Southern society, and helped bind the poor whites to the middle and upper classes with whom they shared ethnic identity. Being uncomfortably close to Negroes in economic status, the poor whites clung to the stereotypes as to a life raft in turbulent waters, and politicians were able to use their fear and antipathy toward blacks as a sure re source of power. Because not only were the stability of social order and the health of business seen as depending upon white

dominance, but the sanctity of the *moral* order as well. Whether denied or admitted, in this area religion was in the service of politics.

Thus, by pitting the interests of the poor whites against those of the Negroes, Southern congressmen countered the South’s Civil War defeat by using its carefully nurtured racial con ict as a means for amassing great political power in Washington. Being representatives of what were, in e ect, one-party states, enabled them to advance to the chairmanship of powerful governmental committees, and through the political horse-trading which keeps the national government functioning, this power was used to foil the progress of Negroes in areas far from the geopolitical center of white supremacy. Here, however, it should be noted that Negroes owe much of their progress since the Second World War to presidents who were of Southern background and heritage. People change, but as Faulkner has pointed out, “was” is never “was”; it is “now,” and in the South a concern

with preserving the “wasness” of slavocracy was an obsession which found facile expression in word and deed.

Their memories of the War Between the States, of Reconstruction, and the di cult times that followed the Hayes-Tilden Compromise had long been mythologized both as a means for keeping Negroes powerless, and for ensuring the loyalty of poor whites in keeping them so. Thus it is ironic that even though the condition of blacks became a national standard by which many whites, both North and South, measured their social advancement, Negroes themselves remained at the bottom of society and the most anti-Negro of whites remained with them. It was Booker T. Washington who had warned that it is impossible to keep another man in a ditch without remaining there with him; unfortunately this advice came from a powerful Southern leader who was also an ex-slave.

More and more, through depression and war, America lived up to its claim of being the land of opportunity whose rewards were available to the individual through the assertion of a second self.

But for many poor and unambitious Southern whites the challenge of such an assertion was far less inviting than clinging to the conviction that they, by the mere fact of race, color, and tradition

alone, were superior to the black masses below them. Yet in their own way they were proud idealists to whom the South’s racial arrangement was sacred beyond most bene ts made possible by social change. Therefore they continued to wrestle with the stereotype of Negro inferiority much as Brer Rabbit kept clinging to Tar Baby’s stickiness. They were so eager to maintain their grip on the status quo and to ignore its costs and contradictions that they willingly used anything, including physical violence, to do so. In rationalizing their condition, they required victims, real or symbolic, and in the daily rituals which gave support to their cherished myth of white supremacy, anti-Negro stereotypes and epithets served as symbolic substitutes for that primitive blood rite of human sacri ce to which they resorted in times of racial tension—but which, for a complexity of reasons, political, economic and humane, were rejected by their more responsible leaders. So it was fortunate, both for Afro-

Americans and for the nation as a whole, that the Southern rituals of race were usually con ned to the realm of the symbolic.

Anti-Negro stereotypes were the currency through which the myth of white supremacy was kept alive, while the awe-inspiring enactment of the myth took the form of a rite in which a human victim was sacri ced. It then became a ritual drama that was usually enacted in a preselected scene (such as a clearing in the woods or in the courthouse square) in an atmosphere of high excitement and led by a masked celebrant dressed in a garish costume who manipulated the numinous objects (lynch ropes, the American ag, shotgun, gasoline and whiskey jugs) associated with the rite as he inspired and instructed the actors in their gory task.

This was the anthropological meaning of lynching, a blood rite that ended in the death of a scapegoat whose obliteration was seen as necessary to the restoration of social order. Thus it served to a rm white goals and was enacted to terrorize Negroes.

Normally, the individual dies his own death, but because lynch mobs are driven by a passionate need to destroy the distinction between the actual and the symbolic, its victim is forced to undergo death for all his group. Nor is he sacri ced to ensure its fertility or

save its soul, but to ll its members with an unreasoning fear of whiteness.

For the lynch mob, blackness is a sign of satanic evil given human form. It is the dark consubstantial shadow which symbolizes all that its opponents reject in social change and in democracy. Thus it does not matter if its sacri cial victim is guilty or innocent, because the lynch mob’s object is to propitiate its insatiable god of whiteness, that myth-gure worshipped as the true source of all things bright and beautiful, by destroying the human attributes of its god’s antagonist which they perceive as the power of blackness. In action, racial discrimination is as nondiscriminating as a car bomb detonated in a crowded public square, because both car bomb and lynch rope are savagely e cient ways of destroying distinctions between the members of a hated group while rendering quite meaningless any moral questioning that might arise regarding the method used. The ultimate goal of lynchers is that of achieving ritual puri cation through destroying the

lynchers' identi cation with the basic *humanity* of their victims. Hence their deafness to cries of pain, their stoniness before the sight and stench of burning esh, their exhilarated and grotesque self-righteousness. And hence our horror at the idea of supposedly civilized men destroying, in the name of their ideal conception of the human, an aspect of their own humanity. But for the group thus victimized, such sacri ces are the source of emotions that move far beyond the tragic conception of pity and terror and down into the abysmal levels of con ict and folly from which arises our famous American humor. Brother, the blackness of *Afro-American* "black humor" is not black; it is tragically human and nds its source and object in the notion of

"whiteness."

But let me not overstate beyond the point necessary for conveying an idea of my state of mind prior to my unanticipated stumble into *Tobacco Road*. The threat, real or imagined, of being the subject of such victimization was o set by that hopeful attitude that is typical of youth and necessary for dealing with life everywhere. While racial danger was always with me, I lived with it as with threats of natural disaster or acts of God. Just as Henry James felt it prudent

to warn Americans against a "superstitious evaluation of Europe,"

Negro folklore with its array of survival strategies warned me against an overevaluation of white pretensions. Despite their dominance and low opinion of Negro intelligence, whites suspected the presence of profound reservations even when Negroes were far less assertive than they are today. This made for a constant struggle over the nature of reality, in which each group probed and sparred as it tried to determine the other's true motives and opinions. A poignant instance of such a struggle appears in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* when Quentin Compson gives Deacon, a ra sh Negro mythomaniac who does odd jobs around Harvard, an important letter to be delivered to Quentin's roommate the following afternoon. But when Deacon notes that the envelope is sealed, he suspects that he is being sent on a fool's errand such as whites delighted in sending Negroes down South. This causes him to drop his Northern mask for that of an old inarticulate "darkey," a pose which reminds Quentin of a Negro retainer whom he had known as a child. Deacon then asks if a joke is being played on him, which

Quentin denies. But then, appealing for that attering reassurance that Southern whites were accustomed to exacting from Negroes, he asks Deacon if any Southerner had ever played a joke on him.

Deacon's reply, as was often true of such exchanges, is ambiguous.

"You're right," he says, "they're ne folks. But you cant live with them."

Then, looking through Deacon into his own hopeless despair, Quentin asks, "Did you ever try?"

The answer is not forthcoming, for in a ash the transplanted black Southerner had retired behind one of the many trickster's masks which his second self had assumed upon coming north and agrees briskly to deliver the letter. Ironically, however, there *is* a fool's errand involved, but it isn't Deacon's; the letter conveys Quentin's intention to drown himself. Thus Deacon, who has rejected the role assigned him by his native South, ends up playing not the traditional black fool but, all unknowingly, the death-messenger for a pathetic Southern aristocrat who is driven to self-destruction by the same prideful confusion of values from which, as

Southerners, both su er. Having tried to live in the South, both had come north dragging the past behind them, but while Deacon used his Southern craftiness to play upon life's possibilities, the past-haunted Quentin destroyed himself because he was unable to reconcile the mythical South he loved with that which had sent Deacon packing.

As Deacon said, many white Southerners were " ne folks," and that was the problem. Whites both hostile and friendly were part of my college scene, and thus a good part of my extracurricular education consisted in learning to live with them while retaining my self-esteem. Negro folklore taught the preservation of one's humanity by masking one's motives and emotions, just as it prepared one to be unsurprised at anything that whites might do, because a concern with race could negate all human bonds, including those of shared blood and experience.

So I tried to observe such ancestral wisdom as I awaited the day when I could leave the South. The catch here was that even the roads that led *away*

from the South were also haunted, a circumstance which I should have learned, but did not, from numerous lyrics that were sung to the blues. Full of great expectations, I went north, and where uneducated Deacon assumed the mask of a former Harvard divinity student, I took on that of a sophisticated New Yorker.

In *Tobacco Road*, Erskine Caldwell appears to have taken a carefully screened assemblage of anti-Negro stereotypes and turned them against the very class in which they found their most fervent proponents, and what he did with them was outrageous. Indeed, he turned things around in such a manner that it was as though Whyte, the Tuskegee victim of the Phenix City hazing, had read Mark Twain, George Washington Harris, Rabelais, Groucho Marx and Voltaire, learned to write, and then, passing for "white" in order to achieve a more intimate knowledge of his characters, had proceeded to embody the most outrageous stereotypes in the Jeeter Lester

family, in-laws and friends. (Caldwell, I hasten to add, is a Georgia-born Anglo-Saxon.)

Nevertheless, Caldwell presents Jeeter Lester as an ignorant, impoverished, Depression-ruined poor white who urges Ellie May, his sixteen-year-old younger daughter, to seduce her older sister's husband so that he, Lester, may steal the equally impoverished young man's only food, a bag of turnips. The father of other mature children who now live in the city, he is a slothful farmer whose rundown farm is in such neglect that even the rats have abandoned the corncrib, and a criminally negligent son whose aged mother must forage for food in the woods, where, by the play's end, she dies alone and neglected. Yet Caldwell keeps Jeeter within the range of the human by having him be so utterly himself. He makes him a poor-white version of the "great sinner" on the order of Dostoevsky's elder Karamazov, and with a similar vitality and willfulness. He is a lecher who has fathered children by his neighbor's wife, and has incestuous inclinations toward one of his married daughters. But it is his stubborn refusal to bow before the economic and ecological developments that have rendered his type of farming no longer possible which gives the play its movement.

Jeeter is a symbol of human willfulness reduced to its illogical essence.

Ada, Mrs. Lester, is an ine ectual wife and mother who has no control over either her husband or their children. Half-starved and worn-out from childbearing, she exerts what physical and moral strength she has in trying to save Pearl, her pride and joy through a casual a air with a stranger, from the decay of Tobacco Road.

Pearl, whom Jeeter married o at the age of twelve, is the wife of Lov, a struggling young workman with whom she refuses either to sleep or talk—a situation utterly ba ing for Lov, and annoying to Jeeter because it has become a subject for local Negro laughter.

Ellie May, the younger daughter, is harelipped, and so helplessly frustrated sexually that Jeeter tries to persuade Lov to exchange her for Pearl and take her away from Tobacco Road before, as he says,

the Negroes get her. But if in Ellie May the Lester sex drive has gotten quite out of hand, in her brother Dude it is unawakened.

Dude, the adolescent son (who opens the play with a mindless bouncing of a ball against the house), is sadistic, disdainful of parental authority, and utterly disrespectful of life and death. If Jeeter is a comic embodiment of sel sh wrongheadedness, Dude (who takes more than his share of Jeeter's stolen turnips by physical force) is the embodiment of his father's character gone to violence.

He is also the agent of his mother's death.

In brief, the Lester family is as seedy as the house in which they live. They have plunged through the fragile oor of civilized humanity, and even the religion which had once given a semblance of order to their lives has become as superstitious as that which the stereotypes attribute to Negroes.

This superstition is exploited by Sister Bessie Rice, a dowdy itinerant preacher of no known denomination who sees sin in even the most innocent of human actions, and uses prayer as a magical incantation through which to manipulate her listener's residue of religious belief to her own advantage. She is a con dence woman who promises for small contributions to cure all ills through the magic of prayer.

Homely and gregarious in manner, Sister Bessie is a widow in search of a mate, both as husband and as a preaching partner with whom she can be more e cient in spreading her version of religion.

Her unlikely choice for this goal is teen-age Dude, but while Jeeter is quite agreeable to such a union of April and December, Dude is uninterested—until, that is, Sister Bessie promises to use the money left by her deceased husband to purchase a new automobile. This does the trick. With Dude in tow, Sister Bessie buys rst a marriage license and then the car, whereupon they speed back to the Lester farm. There Sister Bessie loses no time in performing her own marriage ceremony. This accomplished, she rushes Dude to their wedding chamber, outside of which Jeeter stands on a chair in an e ort to watch her initiate Dude into the sexual mysteries of wedlock.

As it turns out, however, Dude is less interested in connubial pleasure than in driving the new car—which, blowing its horn idiotically and speeding, he does so recklessly that he runs into a loaded wagon and wrecks the car. Later he backs the car over his mother and kills her. Thus, not even the wedding of modern technology with sex and religion can restore Tobacco Road to a state of fertility. The sex instinct remains out of control, religious values are corrupted, the laws guiding the relations between parents and children are destroyed, and the words and rituals that once imposed religious and political ideals upon human conduct are used to justify greed, incest, sloth and theft. In brief, the economic Depression, abetted by Jeeter's sloth and wrongheadedness, has deprived the family not only of its livelihood but denuded them of civilized humanity. Ultimately it is Ada's e orts to save Pearl from further humiliation and Jeeter's dogged will to survive the imbalance of nature and the bank's foreclosure on his farm that redeems the family from a total fall into bestiality.

Yet Caldwell's handling of such material does not produce a response of disgust and hopelessness in the audience. Instead it is swept by a wave of cathartic laughter which leaves it optimistic.

Perhaps, as has been noted in Cleanth Brooks, R.W.B. Lewis, and Robert Penn Warren's *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*, the Lesters' "lack of any burden of guilt and their ability to dispense with most

of the contrivances of civilization gave a sense of release to a great many people."

I would add that during the Depression days of the play's great success, there was such great need for relief, both economic and spiritual, that the grotesque nature of its comedy was fully justi ed.

Perhaps its viewers laughed, and then in retrospect grasped the interplay of social and economic forces upon which the play is focused, and trembled. Which, given Caldwell's anger over the despoliation of the South, must have been his intention.

According to Kenneth Burke, "Comedy should enable us to be observers of ourselves while acting. Its ultimate end would not be passiveness but maximum consciousness. [It should allow] one to

'transcend' himself by noting his own foibles … [and should]

provide a rationale for locating the irrational and the nonrational."

To follow the action of a comedy is to react through its actors, and to identify either with them or with the values with which they struggle. As David Daziel Duncan has written, "the di erence between symbolic and social drama is the di erence between imaginary and real obstacles, but to produce e ects on audiences, symbolic drama must re ect the real obstacles of social drama.

Con ict must be resolved in the symbolic realm by the expression of attitudes which make conformity possible. All such expression, like prayer, is an exhortation to the self and to others. It is a preparation for social action, an investment of the self with con dence and strength." Duncan is speaking of the drama of everyday life in which all successful stage plays are rooted, and when we consider the popularity of *Tobacco Road*, it suggests that during the Great Depression it was most successful in providing its viewers with a rationale for locating the irrational both in themselves and in their society.

The greater the stress within society the stronger the comic antidote required. In this instance the stress imposed by the extreme dislocations of American society was so strong and chaotic that it called for a comedy of the grotesque. Jeeter Lester, the poor white as fool, was made to act the clown in order to save his audience's sanity. Here it is instructive to use Southern Negroes' handling of stress for comparison. Since such stress was an enforced norm of their lives, Negroes struggled with the role assigned them for the same ends that Shakespeare juxtaposed the Fool with Lear, which was to maintain a measure of common sense before the extreme assertions of Lear's kingly pride. In the Lear-like drama of white supremacy, Negroes were designated both clowns and fools, but they "fooled" by way of maintaining their own sense of rational order, no matter how they were perceived by whites. It was far better to be looked down upon as "niggers" than to lose themselves in a world rendered surreal through an excess of racial pride. Their challenge was to endure while imposing their claims upon America's conscience and consciousness, just as they had imposed their style

upon its culture. Forced to be wary observers, they recognized that American life is of a whole, and that what happens to blacks will accrue eventually, one way or another, to the nation as a whole.

This is their dark-visioned version of the broader "American Joke."

Like Faulkner, Caldwell appears to have recognized its existence, for in responding to the imbalance which was shaking American social hierarchy from its apex to its base, he placed the yokelike anti-Negro stereotypes upon the necks of whites, and his audience reacted with a shock of recognition. Caldwell was answering a deeply felt need, and it is interesting that it was during the period of *Tobacco Road's* record-breaking run that the Museum of Modern Art's presentation of its famous exhibit of Dadaist art was widely successful.

For me the shock of Caldwell's art began when Ellie May and Lov were swept up by a forbidden sexual attraction so strong that, uttering sounds of animal passion, they went oundering and skittering back-to-back across the stage in the startling action which father Jeeter, that randy Adam in an Eden gone to weed, named

“horsing.” When the two went into their bizarre choreography of sexual “frustrabation” I was reduced to such helpless laughter that I distracted the entire balcony and embarrassed both myself and my host. It was a terrible moment, for before I could regain control, more attention was being directed toward me than at the action unfolding on the stage.

Then it was as though I had been stripped naked, kicked out of a low-ying plane onto an Alabama road, and ordered to laugh for my life. I laughed and laughed, bending and straightening in a virtual uncontrollable cloud-and-dam-burst of laughter, a self-immolation of laughter over which I had no control. Yet I was hypersensitive to what was happening around me, a fact which left me all the more embarrassed.

Seeing an expression of shocked disbelief on the face of my host, I imagined him saying, “Damn, if I’d known this would be his reaction I would have picked a theater with laughing barrels!”

Suddenly, in addition to my soul-wracking agony of embarrassment, I was being devastated by an old ingroup joke

which played upon the themes of racial con ict, social freedom and the blackness of Negro laughter, a joke whose setting was some small Southern town in which Negro freedom of expression was so restricted that its public square was marked by a series of huge whitewashed barrels labeled FOR COLORED, and into which any Negro who felt a laugh coming on was forced, *pro bono publico*, to thrust his boisterous head.

The joke was used by Tuskegee students, who considered themselves more sophisticated, to kid freshmen from small Southern towns, but although I had heard it many times, it now ashed in my mind with implications that had hitherto escaped me. As it played a counterpoint between my agony of laughter and the action taking place on the stage set of *Tobacco Road* below, it was as though Erskine Caldwell had snared me as an o stage instrument for extending the range of his outragous plotting—and I mean with a cacophony of minor thirds and atted-fths voiced fortissimo by braying gut-bucket brasses!

For now, in my hypersubjective state, viewers around me in the balcony were no longer following the action unfolding on the stage; they were getting to their feet to gawk at me. It was as though I had plunged into a nightmare in which my personality was split in twain, with the lucid side looking on in wonder while the manic side convulsed my body as though a drunken accordionist was using it to belt out the “Beer Barrel Polka.” While I wheezed and choked with laughter, my disgusted lucid self dramatized its cool detachment by noting that things were getting so out of control that Northern white folk in balcony and loge were now catching re and beginning to howl and cheer the disgraceful loss of self-control being exhibited by a young Negro who had become deranged by the shock wave of comedy set in motion by a troupe of professional actors who were doing nothing more extraordinary than portraying the outrageous antics of a group of Southern whites who were totally imaginary—a young man who was so gross as to demonstrate his social unacceptability by violating a whole *encyclopedia* of codes

that regulated proper conduct no less in the theater than in society at large.

In my distorted consciousness the theater was rapidly becoming the scene of a virtual orgy of disgraceful conduct, with everyone getting into the scene-stealing action. So much so, that now the lucid side of me noted with despair that Jeeter Lester (played by Will Geer) and the other Lesters were now shading their eyes and peering open-mouthed toward the balcony as if to say, “What the hell’s happening? Who’s upstaging the stage and turning *Tobacco Road* upside down?” Or perhaps, in shock and dismay, they too were thinking of laughing barrels.

In the joke the barrels were considered a civic necessity and had been improvised as a means of protecting the sensibilities of whites from a pecular form of insanity su ered exclusively by Negroes, who in light of their social status and past condition of servitude were regarded as having absolutely *nothing* in their daily experience which could possibly inspire *rational* laughter. Yet Negroes continued, much as one side of me was doing, to laugh.

They laughed even when overcome by mirth while negotiating the public square, an area graced by its proud military statue, its Civil War cannon and

pyramid of cannon balls, which was especially o -limits to all forms of Negro profanation. Thus, since any but the most inaudible Negro laughter was forbidden in public, Negroes who were wise, or at least fast on their feet, took o *posthaste* for a laughing barrel. (Just as I, in my present predicament, would gladly have done.) Despite their eccentric risibility, the local Negroes bowed to public pressure and cooperated, at least to the extent that they were physically able.

But now as I continued to roar at the weird play-without-a-play in which part of me was involved, my sober self marked the fact that the entire audience was being torn in twain. Most of the audience was white, but now many who occupied seats down in the orchestra section were beginning to protest the unscheduled disruption taking place above them. Leaping to their feet, they were shaking their sts at those in the balcony, and they in turn were shouting their disdain for those so lacking in an appreciation for the impromptu

broadening of the expected comedy. As they raged at one another in what was rapidly becoming a Grangerford-Shepherdson feud of expletives, I recalled a similar con ict which took place in the laughing barrel town and cracked up again.

There, too, certain citizens had assumed their democratic right of dissent to oppose the barrels as an *ipso jure* form of reverse discrimination. Why not, they argued, force Negroes to control themselves at their *own* expense, as did everyone else. It was an argument which fell on deaf ears, because it ignored the self-evident fact that Negro self-control was the very *last* thing in the world that they really wanted, whether in this or in any other area of Negro lives. Therefore, these passionate quodlibetarians and their objections to quotas were ignored because the great majority of the citizenry regarded their unique form of public accommodation as bestowing a dual blessing upon their town. To an extent, this blessing included Negroes, for not only did the laughing barrels save many a black a sore behind (and the understa ed police force energy sorely needed in other areas), they performed the far more important function of providing whites a means of saving face before the confounding, persistent and embarrassing mystery of black laughter.

Unfortunately it was generally agreed that the barrels were by no means an *elegant* solution of what whites regarded as a most grievous and inelegant problem. After all, having to observe the posture of a Negro stuck halfway into a laughing barrel (or rising and falling helplessly in a theater balcony) was far from an aesthetic experience. Nor was that all, for often when seen laughing with their heads stuck in a barrel and standing, as it were, upside down upon the turbulent air, Negroes appeared to be taken over by a form of schizophrenia which left them even more psychically frazzled than whites regarded them as being by nature.

But while the phenomenon was widely discussed, not even the wisest of whites could come up with a satisfactory explanation. All they knew was that when such an incident occurred, instead of sobering up, as any white man in a similar situation would have done, a Negro might well take o and laugh all the harder (as I in

my barrelless state was doing). It appeared that in addition to reacting to whatever ignorant, harebrained notion had set him o in the rst place, the Negro was apt to double up with a second gale of laughter, triggered, apparently, by his own mental image of himself laughing at himself laughing upside down. It was, all whites agreed, another of the many Negro mysteries with which it was their lot to contend, but *whatever* its true cause, it was most disturbing to a white observer.

And especially on Market Day, a time when the public square teemed with whites and blacks seeking in their separate-but-equal fashions to combine business with pleasure while taking advantage of the square's holiday atmosphere. On Market Days, thanks to the great in ux of Negroes, the uproar from laughing barrels could become so loud and raucous that it not only disturbed the serenity of the entire square, but shook up the whites' erce faith in the stability of their most cherished traditions. On such occasions the uproar from the laughing barrels could become so contagious and irresistible that any whites who were so unfortunate as to be caught near the explosions of laughter would nd themselves compelled to join in—and this included even such important gures as the mayor, lawyer, cotton broker, Baptist minister and brewers of prime "white-lightning" whiskey. It was an appalling state of a airs, for despite their sternest resistance, even

such distinguished whites literally cracked up and roared. Although it was recognized that it sprang from the *unnatural* and corrupting blackness of Negro laughter, it was a fact of Southern life, and thus it was that from time to time even the most digni ed and tradition-bound whites found themselves joining in (as, much to the discomfort of my somber, balcony-trapped self, the whites around me were doing).

Nor did it help that many of the town's whites suspected that when a Negro had his head thrust into a laughing barrel he became endowed with a strange form of extrasensory perception—or second sight—which allowed him to respond uproariously to their unwilling participation. It was clear that given a black laugher's own uncouth uproar, he could not possibly *hear* its infectious damage to them. When such reversals occurred, the whites assumed

that in some mysterious fashion the Negro involved was not only laughing at *himself laughing*, but was also laughing at *them* laughing at his laughing against their own most determined wills. If such was the truth, it suggested that somehow a Negro (and this meant *any* Negro) could become with a single hoot-and-cackle both the source and master of an outrageous and untenable situation. Hence it was viewed as a most aggravating problem, indeed the most vicious of vicious circles ever to be imposed upon the long-su ering South by the white man's burden.

Since it was an undisputed fact that whites and blacks were of di erent species, it followed that they could by no means be expected to laugh at the same things. Therefore, when whites found themselves joining in with the coarse merriment issuing from the laughing barrels, they su ered the double embarrassment of laughing against their own God-given nature while being unsure of exactly why, or at what speci cally, they were laughing. Which meant that somehow the Negro in the barrel had them *over* a barrel.

This, then, was the crux of the town's dilemma: e orts to control Negro laughter with laughing barrels were as futile as attaining Christian grace by returning to the womb, because a Negro laughing in a laughing barrel simply turned the world upside down and inside out. In so doing, he *in*-verted (and thus *sub-verted)* tradition, and thus the preordained and cherished scheme of Southern racial relationships was blasted asunder.

Therefore, it was feared that if such unhappy instances of interracial laughter occurred with any frequency, it would create a crisis in which social order would be fatally undermined by something as unpolitical as a bunch of Negroes with their laughing heads stuck into the interiors of a batch of old whitewashed whiskey barrels.

The outrageous absurdity of this state of a airs was as vexing to the town as that in which I found myself while the old joke banged and shuddered through my memory. Despite the fact that the whites had done everything they could think of to control the blackness of Negro laughter, Negroes continued to laugh. The disapproval of the general public notwithstanding, they were even *bursting* barrels all over the public square, and thus adding to the high cost of

maintaining public order. Since this was (in more ways than one) at white expense, the whites were faced with a Hobson's choice between getting rid of Negroes and su ering the economic loss of their labor, or living with the commotion in the laughing barrels.

(Yes, but they had at least a ghost of a choice, while by now it was as though I had been taken over by embattled Siamese twins who couldn't agree for disagreeing, and neither of whom could exit the scene, thanks to the detachment of one and the mirth-wracked state of the other.)

In the town, however, great argument raged on both sides of the question. All agreed that the laughing barrels were an economic burden, but the proponents of the "Barrel Act," as it was known, justi ed their position with philosophical arguments to the e ect that while it was true that these unique public facilities were costly, they served not only as a form of noise-pollution control, but the higher—and more spiritual—purpose of making it unnecessary for white folks to su er the indignity of having to observe the confounding and degrading spectacle of a bunch of uncultivated Negroes knocking themselves out with a form of laughter that had no apparent motivation or discernible target.

What a terrible time and place to be ambushed by such an irreverent joke! By now my eyes were so full of tears that I could no longer see Hughes or anyone else, but at least the moisture had the e ect of calming me down.

Then, as the unruly world of *Tobacco Road* nally returned, my divided selves were made one again by a sense of catharsis. Yes, but at the expense of undergoing a humiliating, body-wracking con ict of emotions! Embarrassment, self-anger, ethnic scorn, and at last a feeling of comic relief —all because Erskine Caldwell compelled me to laugh at his symbolic and therefore nonthreatening Southern whites. Thus he shocked me into recognizing certain absurd aspects of our common humanity.

Kenneth Burke would probably have said that I had been hit with a

"perspective by incongruity," leading to a reversal of expectations in which the juxtaposition of past and present, comic Southland and quasi-illusory New York, had set up vibrations that routed my self-composure. It was as though I had plunged through the wacky

mirrors of a fun house to discover on the other side a weird distortion of perspective which made for a painful but redeeming recti cation of vision. In a ash, time was telescoped and the imaginary assumed the lineaments of past experiences through which Jeeter Lester's comic essence became a recognizable property of characters and events that I had known in the past.

After all, thanks to Governor "Alfalfa Bill" Murray's Jeeter Lesterish appeal to the bias of Oklahoma's farm vote, hadn't I seen the state capitol's grounds a-wave with grain "as high as an elephant's eye" (which proved to be a foreshadowing of events which led, years later, to the adoption of Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Oklahoma" as the state's o cial song)? A bit later, hadn't I seen those same graciously landscaped grounds splattered with far more oil rigs than there were holes dug by Ty Ty in his futile search for gold in Caldwell's *God's Little Acre?* I had indeed, and the main di erence was that the oil rigs produced oil; otherwise, Alfalfa Bill might have stepped out of a Caldwell novel.

Thus I now recognized that there was much more of Jeeter Lester's outrageousness in my past than I had ever imagined, and quite a bit of it showed up on my side of the color line.

There were uneducated men whose attitudes and bearing ripped through the usual stereotypes like a Brahma bull goring the paper image displayed on

Bull Durham Tobacco Company billboards.

Their violence was usually directed against their own kind, but they were known to go after whites as well, and were no more respectful of what most people considered civilized conduct than Jeeter Lester.

I had known the type in Oklahoma and admired a few for insisting upon being themselves. Often they were of vernacular folk culture but with active minds and were absolutely unrestrained in attacking any subject that caught their attention. Once, while working as a barbershop shoeshine boy, I had heard such a group engage in a long discussion of Mr. John D. Rockefeller Senior's relations with the women whom they assumed it natural for such a powerful man to have. They took it for granted that he had no less than a "stable full," speculated on how much he paid for their favors, and concluded that he rewarded them with trunks full of brand-new

dimes. Then they discussed the brands of brandy and whiskey which they assumed Mr. Rockefeller drank, argued over the designs and costs of the silk underwear worn by his favorite fancy women, and then almost came to blows when estimating the number of "yard chillun" he had scattered around the country and abroad.

Poor old John D. didn't know it, but they put him through the windmill of their fantasies with gusto. What's more, he emerged enhanced in their sight as an even more exceptional man among such exceptional men as themselves, thanks to their having endowed him with a sexual potency and an utter disregard for genteel conduct that would have blown that gentleman's mind.

Before they were done they had the founder of Standard Oil shooting pool, playing strip poker, and engaging in a barbecue-eating contest with J. P. Morgan and Henry Ford—from which, naturally, he emerged the winner. Only when they put him through a Charleston contest with "Tickle-toes from Tulsa," a famous Negro dancer, did he fall below their exacting standards. Nevertheless he remained the mighty Rockefeller, though so magni ed that he was far more "John Henry" than John Davidson. In working him over, they created such an uproar of laughter that the owner had to ask them to leave the barbershop. But by that time, both to my

bewilderment and delight, they had touched one of the most powerful men of the nation with the tarbrush of their comic imaginations, Afro-Americanized him, and claimed him as one of their very own. It was amazing how consistently they sought (like Jeeter Lester) to make the world conform to the narrow compass of their own hopes and dreams.

There were still others who in pursuing their self-reliant wrongheadedness had given me a glimpse of the "tragic." Had not I seen a good part of my community, including teen-age boys, reduced to despair over the terrible death of a self-taught genius of an automobile mechanic, who after burning his ngers while working with the electrical system of a Model T Ford had cut out the o ending esh with his pocketknife, an act of ignorant pride which resulted in his death by lockjaw? In those days any boy who could lay hands on a coil from a Model T and the hand-cranked magneto

from a discontinued telephone would rig it as a device for shocking his unsuspecting friends, but now, to our dismay, death was revealed to be lurking within our rare electrical toys.

Even closer to my immediate experience, wasn't Ellie May's and Lov's "horsing" all over the stage of *Tobacco Road* embarrassingly symbolic of my own frustration as a healthy young man whose sexual outlet was limited, for the most part, to "belly-rubbing" with girls met casually at public dances? It was and it wasn't, depending upon my willingness to make or withhold a human identi cation.

Actually, I had no choice but to identify, for Caldwell's art had seen to that.

Thus, for all its intentional outrageousness, the comedy of *Tobacco Road* was deeply rooted in the crazy-quilt life I knew. Caldwell had me both coming and going, black side, white side, and straight down my improvised American middle. On one side of my mind I had thought of my life as being of a whole, segregated but in many ways superior to that of the Lesters. On the other side, I thought of the Lester type as being, in the Negro folk phrase, "a heap of whiteness gone to waste," and therefore a gross caricature of anything that was viable in the idea of white superiority. But now Caldwell had highlighted the warp and woof of my own ragtag American pattern. So, laughing hysterically, I felt like the fat man whom I'd

seen slip and fall on the icy sidewalk and who lay there laughing while passersby looked on in bewilderment, until he got to his feet still laughing and punched the one man who had joined in his laughter square in the mouth. In my case, however, there was no one to punch, because I embodied both fat man and the passerby who was so rash as to ignore Baudelaire's warning. Therefore I laughed and I trembled, and gained thereby a certain wisdom.

I could not have put it into words at the time, but by forcing me to see the comedy in Jeeter Lester's condition and allowing me to react to it in an interracial situation without the threat of physical violence, Caldwell told me something important about who I was.

By easing the con ict that I was having with my Southern experience (yes, and with my South-Southwestern identity), he helped initiate me into becoming, if not a "New Yorker," at least a

more tolerant American. I suppose such preposterous comedy is an indispensable agency for dealing with American experience precisely because it allows for redeeming perspectives on our rampant incongruities. Given my background and yearnings, there was no doubt that I needed such redemption, and for that I am eternally grateful to Erskine Caldwell: Southerner, American humorist, and mighty destroyer of laughing barrels.

Written in 1985, especially for rst publication of *Going to the Territory*.

Remembering Richard Wright

EARLIER today while considering my relationship with Richard Wright, I recalled Heraclitus' axiom "Geography is fate," and was struck by the ironic fact that in this country, where Frederick Jackson Turner's theory of the frontier has been so in uential in shaping our conception of American history, very little attention has been given to the role played by geography in shaping the fate of Afro-Americans.

For example, Wright was a Mississippian who migrated to Chicago and then to New York. I, by contrast, am an Oklahoman, and by geographical origin a Southwesterner. Wright grew up in a part of what was the old

Confederacy, while I grew up in a state which possesses no indigenous tradition of chattel slavery. Thus, while we both grew up in segregated societies, mine lacked many of the intensities of custom, tradition and manners which “colored” the institutions of the Old South, and which were important in shaping Wright’s point of view. Both of us were descendants of slaves, but since my civic, geographical and political circumstances were di erent from those of Mississippi, Wright and I were united by our connection with a past condition of servitude, and divided by geography and a di erence of experience based thereupon. Yet it was this very di erence of experience and background which had much to do with Wright’s important impact upon my sensibilities.

Then there was New York. I met Wright there in 1937, and it was no accidental encounter. It came about because through my reading and working in the library at Tuskegee Institute, I had become fascinated by the exciting developments that were taking place in modern literature. Somehow in my uninstructed reading of Eliot and Pound, I had recognized a relationship between modern poetry and jazz music, and this led me to wonder why I was not encountering similar devices in the work of Afro-American writers. Indeed, such

reading and wondering prepared me not simply to *meet* Wright, but to seek him out. It led, in other words, to a personal quest. I insist upon the “seeking out” because, you see, I too have an ego, and it is important to me that our meeting came about through my own initiative. Not only is this historically true, but it has something to do with my being privileged to be here on what I consider to be a very important moment in the history of our literature. Perhaps Richard Wright would have dismissed such a moment as impossible even as late as 1957, but still, here we are, gathered in the hot summertime to pay him honor. *I* would not have been surprised, since it was my reading of one of Wright’s poems in the *New Masses* which gave me a sense of his importance. I had arrived in New York on July 5, 1936—a date of no broad symbolic importance, but one highly signi cant to me because it made a meeting with Wright a possibility. Although the *New Masses* poem was not a masterpiece, I found in it traces of the modern poetic sensibility and technique that I had been seeking.

The morning after my arrival in New York, I encountered standing in the entrance of the Harlem YMCA two fateful gures. They were Langston Hughes, the poet, and Dr. Alain Locke, the then head of the philosophy department at Howard University. I had never seen Langston Hughes before, but regardless of what is said about the quality of education provided by the old Negro schools (ours was named for Frederick Douglass), we were taught what is now termed

“Black History” and were kept abreast of current events pertaining to our people. Thus, as early as the sixth grade we were made aware of the poetry of Langston Hughes, along with the work of the other Negro Renaissance writers, so I recognized Hughes from his photographs. But I recognized Dr. Locke because he had been at Tuskegee only a few weeks prior to my arrival in New York, having gone there to visit Hazel Harrison, a teacher in the music department, and a very ne pianist who had been one of Ferruccio Busoni’s prize pupils. Here I’m trying to provide a bit of historical background to give you an idea of the diverse cultural forces at play in the lives of Afro-Americans from the early 1920s to 1936.

Miss Harrison was a friend of Proko ev, and possessed some of his scores at a time when few would have imagined that a Russian master’s music was being made a part of the musical consciousness of an Afro-American college. And certainly not in such a college as Tuskegee—even though Tuskegee’s musical tradition was actually rich and quite varied. This is but another example of the contradictions of American culture which escape our attention because they are obscured by racism. Yet thanks to Miss Harrison, I could, like any eager, young, celebrity-fascinated college junior, walk straight up to Dr. Locke and say, “Dr. Locke, do you remember me?” To my delight he said, “Why, of course I do.” He then introduced me to Langston Hughes and told Hughes of my interest in poetry.

Langston Hughes had with him copies of Malraux’s *Man’s Fate* and *The Days of Wrath*, and after a few moments’ conversation he said,

“Since you like to read so much, maybe you’d like to read these novels and then return them to their owner,” and so I did. The returns were tremendous. This incident and this meeting later made it possible for me to ask Langston Hughes if he knew Richard Wright. “Yes,” he said, “and it so happens that

he’s coming here from Chicago next week.” Then, with his great generosity, and without telling me, Hughes wrote Richard Wright that there was a young Negro something-or-the-other in New York who wanted to meet him. The next thing I knew I received a postcard—which I still have—that said, “Dear Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes tells me that you’re interested in meeting me. I will be in New York …” on such and such a date in July … signed Richard Wright. Thus I was to meet Wright on the day after his arrival in New York in July of 1937.

At the time I still thought that I would return to Tuskegee to take my degree in music, but I was not to make it. I had come to New York to earn expenses for my senior year, but it was during the Depression and I was unable to make enough money. Then, in talking with Wright, my plans and goals were altered—were, in fact, fatefully modi ed by Wright’s.

Wright had come to New York for two purposes, one which was talked about openly, and the other quietly underplayed. The rst was to become the editor of the magazine *New Challenge*. The other was to work in the Harlem bureau of the Communist newspaper *The Daily Worker*. With Wright’s presence in the *Worker’s* 135th Street o ce, my introduction to the craft of writing leaped ahead, for it was there that I read many of his unpublished stories and discussed his ideas about literature and culture.

Wright was quiet concerning his assignment to the *Worker’s* sta because he had left Chicago under a cloud. In 1936 he had been thrown out of the May Day parade, sacred to all Communists, for refusing to carry out some assignment. The fact that he had been publicly humiliated by both white *and* black Communists had left him quite bitter. However, someone higher up in the hierarchy recognized his value and was able to persuade him to go to New York, which proved to be to my good fortune.

Being unemployed much of the time, I began to hang around the Harlem bureau, not so much for the ideology being purveyed there

—although I found it fascinating—but because of Wright and the manuscripts of a sheaf of novelettes (later published as *Uncle Tom's Children)* that lay in an open desk drawer. Of all those who visited the o ce, I was the only one who bothered to read these now famous stories. Perhaps this was because his comrades looked upon Wright as an intruder. He was distrusted not only as an

"intellectual" and thus a potential traitor, but as a possible "dark horse" in the race for the Harlem party leadership, a "ringer" who had been sent from Chicago to cause them trouble. Wright had little sense of humor about their undisguised hostility, and this led, as would be expected, to touchy relationships. Despite his obvious organizational and journalistic abilities—the *Worker* featured his reportage—the members of the Communist rank and le sneered at his intellectuality, ridiculed his writings, and dismissed his concern with literature and culture as an a ectation. In brief, they thought him too ambitious, and therefore a threat to their own ambitions as possible party functionaries.

A true outsider, I was amused by this comedy of misperception, for Wright seemed anything but a threat to their petty ambitions.

Besides, I was absolutely intrigued by his talent and felt privileged to read his writings. I had never met anyone who, lacking the fanfare of public recognition, could move me with the unpublished products of his ctional imagination. Of course I read Wright's work uncritically, but there was no doubt in my mind that he was an exceptional writer. Even better, he was delighted to discuss the techniques, the ideological and philosophical implications of his writings, and this with someone who had never attempted to write anything beyond classroom assignments and a few poems. Evidently Wright wished to exchange ideas with someone of his own general background, and I was fortunate in being able to contribute more than curiosity to our discussion. I had studied with creative musicians, both classical and jazz, and had been taught to approach the arts analytically. I had also read fairly widely on my own. But to encounter the

possessor of such literary talent and have him make me his friend and con dant was indeed an exciting and inspiring experience.

Nor did it end with mere talk. As editor of *New Challenge*, Wright asked me to contribute a book review in its rst issue. To one who had never attempted to write anything, this was the wildest of ideas.

Still, pressed by his editorial needs, and sustained by his belief that an untapped supply of free-oating literary talent existed in the Negro community, Wright kept after me, and I wrote a review and he published it. Then he went even further by suggesting that I write a short story!

I said, “But I’ve never even tried to write a story …”

He said, “Look, you talk about these things, you’ve read a lot, and you’ve been around. Just put something down and let me see it …”

So I wrote a story, titled “Hymie’s Bull,” that was based upon experiences that I’d had a few years before when riding freight trains from Oklahoma to Alabama. I was dubious over the outcome, but to my delight Wright accepted the story and sent it to the printer.

Ah, but fate, as they say, was in the wings, and *New Challenge* was not to appear again. I hasten to add that this was not a disaster created by my rst attempt at ction. Rather, it had to do with an aspect of Afro-American cultural history and involved certain lingering echoes of the Negro Renaissance, a movement which ran out of gas with the Crash of 1929. As the period ended, a number of gures important to the movement had died, and with the Great Depression upon them, those members of the white community who had sponsored the Renaissance were unable to continue. The money was no longer available, and so the movement languished. However, with the deepening of the Depression there came a signi cant development in the form of the federal projects for the arts that were organized by the Works Progress Administration. These projects were important to the continuing development of Afro-American artists. Although a reaction to a national disaster, they provided, as have most national disasters, the possibility for a broader Afro-American freedom. This is a shocking thing to say, but it is also a very *blues*, or tragicomic,

thing to say, and a fairly accurate description of the manner in which, for Negroes, a gift of freedom arrived wrapped in the guise of disaster. It is ironic, but no less true, that the most tragic incident of our history, the Civil War, was a disaster which ended American slavery.

Wright himself worked on both the Chicago and the New York Federal Writers' Project, and I could not have become a writer at the time I began had I not been able to earn my board and keep by doing research for the New York project. Through Wright's encouragement, I had become serious about writing, but before going on the project I sometimes slept in the public park below City College because I had neither job nor money. But my personal a airs aside, the WPA provided an important surge to Afro-American cultural activity. The result was not a "renaissance," but there was a resuscitation and transformation of that very vital artistic impulse that is abiding among Afro-Americans. Remember that our African forefathers originated in cultures wherein even the simple routines of daily living were highly ritualized, and that even their cooking utensils were fashioned with forms of symbolism

which resonated with overtones of godhead. Though modi ed, if not suppressed, by the experience of American slavery, this tradition of artistic expressiveness has infused the larger American culture. Afro-American cultural style is an abiding aspect of our culture, and the economic disaster which produced the WPA gave it an accelerated release and allowed many Negroes to achieve their identities as artists.

But back to Wright and *New Challenge*. That magazine was organized by people active in the Negro Renaissance, whose outlook was in many ways at odds with Wright's. Thus, according to Wright, *New Challenge* ended publication because the two young women who were in charge before he came on the scene were afraid that his connection with the Communist party would lead to its being taken over. Rather than lose control, they got rid of Wright.

History has no vacuum. There are transformations, there are lesions, there are metamorphoses, and there are mysteries that cloak the clashing of individual wills and private interests. *New Challenge* faded, but Wright went on to publish *Uncle Tom's Children*, and shortly afterward *Native Son*.

When Wright came to New York his talents as a writer were, to a large extent, already formed. Indeed, even before 1927, when he migrated to Chicago, he had published ction in Robert S. Abbott's magazine *The Bronzeman*. So it isn't true, as has been said, that the Communist party "discovered" his talent. Wright was literary in an informed way even in Jackson, Mississippi. But what happened to him in Chicago resulted from his coming into contact with an organized political group which possessed a concept of social hierarchy that was a conscious negation of our racially biased social system. Thus, through his political a liation, Wright was able to identify his artistic ambitions with what was, for him, a totally new conception of social justice. In the discussions that took place in the Chicago John Reed Club he sharpened his conception of literary form and the relationship between ctional techniques and the world view of Marxism. He came to see art and society in terms of an ideology that was

concerned with power, and willing to forgo racial di erences in order to take over the world. I realize that this is all rather abstract, but I am trying to suggest the tenor of our discussions. Fortunately Wright's interest in literary theory was not limited to areas prescribed by the party line.

For instance, I was very curious about how one could put Marx and Freud together. No real problem now, I suppose, but coming from where I did, it was puzzling. I was to discover that it was also a problem for Communist intellectuals and for many of their opponents. Either Marx was raised up and Freud put down, or Freud raised up and Marx put down. For me all of this was pretty strange, but at least I could discuss such matters with Richard Wright. This was important for a young writer (and of course I became a young writer, for I soon realized that I wasn't going back to Tuskegee and to music). Since Wright had assured me that I possessed a certain talent, I decided that writing was the direction I would take. I don't know whether he was satis ed with my talent or not; I suspect not.

This was interesting, for while I possessed more formal education, it was he who encouraged me and gave me a sense of direction. I'd like you to appreciate the irony of this development: here was a young Afro-American who had gone only to grade school, but who had arrived in Chicago

possessing a certain articulateness and an undeveloped talent for writing. He had no further formal education

—although he was aware of the University of Chicago and came to associate with a number of its intellectuals—but he gave himself over to the complex reality of late 1927 Chicago and made it his own. Chicago, the city where after years of Southern Negro migration great jazz was being played and reinvented, where the stockyards and railroads, and the steel mills of Gary, Indiana, were transforming a group of rural, agricultural Americans into city people and into a *lumpenproletariat*, a class over whom we now despair.

Wright found the scene challenging. He learned that wherever one wanders in this country, one must pay his dues to change and take advantage of possibility by asserting oneself. You'll recall my saying earlier that "geography is fate"; now let me say that one's fate is

also determined by what one does and by what one does *not* do.

Wright set out to come into a conscious possession of his experience as Negro, as political revolutionary, as writer, and as citizen of Chicago.

Somehow, getting into the John Reed Club, Wright had learned the techniques of agitprop art—which he came later to despise—and before he went to Harlem he had been a contributing editor of the original *Partisan Review*, and a founder of such magazines as *Anvil*.

He had been poor in accepting discipline, and had had his political troubles in the Communist party, but when I knew him he was not shrinking from the challenges of his existence. Nor complaining that he'd been " 'buked and scorned." Nor did he feel that he had handicaps that could not be overcome because of his identity as a Negro writer. Instead he was striving to live consciously—at least artistically and intellectually—at the top of his times. Wright's spirit was such, and his sense of possibility was such, that even during the time when he was writing *Native Son* he was concerned with learning the stylistic and dialectical ne points found in the work of Steinbeck, Hemingway, Malraux, and Thomas Mann; it was these he viewed as his competitors. I warn you that this is only *my* interpretation, but

it was as though Wright was thinking, “I have a ner sense, a more basic knowledge of American reality than Hemingway or Steinbeck or anybody else who is writing.” He had the kind of con dence that jazzmen have, although I assure you that he knew very little about jazz and didn’t even know how to dance.

Which is to say that he didn’t possess the full range of Afro-American culture. But having the con dence of his talent, having the sense (which he gained from Marxism) that he was living in a world in which he did not have to be confused by the mysti cations of racism, Wright harnessed his revolutionary tendencies to a political program which he hoped would transform American society. Through his cultural and political activities in Chicago he made a dialectical leap into a sense of his broadest possibilities as man and as artist. He was well aware of the forces ranked against him, but in his quiet way he was as arrogant in facing up to them as was Louis Armstrong in a ne blaring way.

To a young Oklahoman this attitude of Wright’s was a rmative, and again, “geography is fate.” For in that state our people fought back. We seldom won more than moral victories, but we fought back, as can be seen from the many civil rights victories that were initiated there. And as can be heard in the Southwestern jazz and the performances of the Jimmy Rushings, the “Hot Lips” Pages, the Count Basies, the Benny Motens and Charlie Christians, we were an assertive people, and our mode of social assertion was artistic, mainly musical, as well as political. But there was also the Negro church, wherein you heard the lingering accents of nineteenth-century rhetoric with its emphasis upon freedom and individual responsibility, a rhetorical style which gave us Lincoln, Harriet Tubman, Harriet Beecher Stowe and the other abolition-preaching Beechers. Which gave us Frederick Douglass, John Jasper and many other eloquent and heroic Negroes whose spirit still moves among us through the contributions they made to the exibility, music and idealism of the American language. Richard Wright was a possessor of that tradition. It is resonant in his ction and it was a factor in his eager acceptance of social responsibility.

But now I should add that as far as Negroes in New York were concerned, Wright was for the most part friendless. Part of this was due to the fact that

he kept to Communist circles and was intensely involved with writing and political activities. But as far as his rapid development as a writer is concerned, it would not have been possible but for the Chicago John Reed Club. This required an intellectual environment, and in Negro communities such were few and far between. Thus, given his talent and driving ambition, it was fortunate that he found the necessary associations among other young writers, many of whom were not Communists. Within such integrated groups he could question ideas, programs, theories. He could argue over philosophical interpretations of reality and say, if he chose, “Well, dammit, I’m black, and this concept of this program doesn’t seem valid to me.” This was important for Wright, and since he a rmed many impulses which I felt and understood in my own way, it proved important to me. No less important was his

willingness to discuss problems encountered within the Communist party, and especially his di culty in pursuing independent thought.

Because there, too, he was encountering a form of intellectual racism. It was not couched in the rhetoric of Negro inferiority *à l’américain*, but in the form of an insistence upon blind discipline and a constant pressure to follow unthinkingly a political line. It was dramatized in the servile attitudes of certain black Communist functionaries who regarded Wright, with his eloquence and his tendency toward an independence of thought, as a dangerous gure who had to be kept under rigid control.

Of course Wright’s personality would not allow him to shun a battle. He fought back and was into all kinds of trouble. He had no interest in keeping silent as the price of his freedom of expression.

Nor was he so dazzled by his freedom to participate in the councils of newspapers and magazines as to keep his mouth shut. Instead he felt that his experience, insight and talent were important to the party’s correct assessment of American reality. Thus he fought to make his comrades understand that they didn’t know a damn thing about the complexities of the South, whether black or white, and insisted that they could not possibly understand America’s racial situation by approaching it through such facile slogans as “Black and White Unite and Fight.” Not when the white workingman was doing us the greatest face-to-face damage, and when the

unions were practicing policies of racial exclusion. In trying to get this across, in saying, as it were, “Your approach is too simple,” Wright met all kinds of resistance, both ideological and personal, but at least he made the ght.

I bring this up here by way of o ering you something of the background of emotional and intellectual con ict out of which *Native Son* was written. I read most of *Native Son* as it came o the typewriter, and I didn’t know what to think of it except that it was wonderful. I was not responding critically. After all, how many of you have had the unexpected privilege of reading a powerful novel as it was literally ripped o the typewriter? Such opportunities are rare, and being young, I was impressed beyond all critical words. I am still impressed. I feel that *Native Son* is one of the major literary

events in the history of American literature. I can say this even though at this point I have certain reservations about its view of reality. Yet it continues to have a powerful e ect, and it seems to me a mistake to say, as was said not long ago in *Life* magazine, that *Native Son* is a “neglected” novel. Here I should remind those of you who are too young to remember, that *Native Son* was such a popular work that the dust jacket of the Book-of-the-Month Club edition could consist of a collage made of accolades written by critics and reviewers throughout the country. It was a nancial as well as a critical success, and with its publication Wright became a famous man.

But its success by no means stilled his burning passion—not simply for justice, but to become the author of other compelling works of literature. His response to the reception of *12 Million Black Voices*, which is, I think, his most lyrical work, is an example. He was bemused by the fact that this work could move his white readers to tears, and saw this as an evasion of the intended impact of his vision. Thus he began to talk over and over again of forging such hard, mechanical images and actions that no white reading them could a ord the luxury of tears.

But here I must turn critic. For in *my* terms, Wright failed to grasp the function of artistically induced catharsis, which suggests that he failed also to understand the Afro-American custom of shouting in church (a form of

ritual cartharsis), or its power to cleanse the mind and redeem and rededicate the individual to forms of ideal action.

Perhaps he failed to understand, or else rejected, those moments of exultation wherein man's vision is quickened by the eloquence of an orchestra, an actor, orator or dancer, or by anyone using the arts of music or speech or symbolic gesture to create within us moments of high consciousness—moments wherein we grasp, in the instant, a knowledge of how transcendent, abysmal and yet a rmative it can be to be human. Yet it is for such moments of inspired communication that the artist lives. The irony here is that Wright

could evoke them, but felt, for ideological reasons, that tears were a betrayal of the struggle for freedom.

I disagreed with his analysis, for tears can induce as well as deter action. Nevertheless it is imperative that I say that through his writings Richard Wright achieved, here in the social and racial chaos of the United States, a position of artistic equality. He insisted upon it—and not only in his own political party, with which he eventually broke, but internationally. He was never at peace. He was never at rest. The restlessness which sent our forefathers hurtling toward the West Coast, and which now has us climbing up all sorts of walls, was very much within him. In 1956, in Paris, when we were leaving the headquarters of the magazine *Présence Africaine* (this is the rst time I've revealed this, and I hope he won't mind, since it might be meaningful to some scholar), he said to me,

"Really, Ralph, after I broke with the Communist party I had nowhere else to go …" This was said in resigned explanation of his continued presence in Europe. I think he was telling me that his dedication to Communism had been so complete and his struggle so endless that he had had to change his scene, that he had had to nd a new ground upon which to struggle. Because as long as he stayed within the framework of his political party, he had to struggle on two fronts, asserting on one the principles of equality and possibility (which the Communists stood for, or *pretended* to stand for), and on the other, insisting upon the fact *not* that it took a Negro to tell the truth about the Afro-American experience, but that you had to at least get down into the mud and live with its basic realities to do so.

You could not deal with its complexities simply from a theoretical perspective.

Black Boy was an attempt to depict some of those complexities. So much of this autobiography (originally entitled *American Hunger)* is exaggerated, I think, precisely because Wright was trying to dramatize—indeed, because of its many ctional techniques he could with justice have called it a “non ction” novel—the complexity of Negro American experience as he knew it and had lived it. The ctional techniques were not there in order to con

anyone, but to drive home to Americans, black and white, something of the complexity and cost in human terms, in terms of the loss to literature and to art, and to the cause of freedom itself, imposed by racial discrimination—the cost, that is, of growing up in a society which operated on one side of its mind by the principle of equality while qualifying that principle severely according to the dictates of racism. Wright was thinking and ghting over these issues at close quarters, ghting with the Communists especially because he had thought that they o ered a viable solution. Instead he discovered that they were blind.

But now to more delightful relationships with Wright. He had as much curiosity about how writing is written as I had about how music is composed, and our curiosity concerning artistic creation became the basis of our friendship. Having studied music from the age of eight, and having studied harmony and symphonic form in our segregated school, I was also interested in how music related to the other arts. This, combined with my growing interest in literary creation, made my contact with Wright’s enthusiasm an educational and spirit-freeing experience. Having read Pound, Eliot, Shaw and the criticism of Harriet Monroe and I. A. Richards—all available in Tuskegee’s excellent little library—it was important that in Wright I had discovered a Negro American writer who possessed a working knowledge of modern literature, its techniques and theories. My approach to literature was by no means racial, but Wright was not only available, he was eager to share his interests, and it gave me something of that sense of self-discovery and exaltation which is implicit in the Negro church and in good jazz. Indeed, I had found it in baseball and football games, and it turns up in almost any group activity of Afro-Americans

when we’re not really thinking about white folks and are simply being our own American selves.

I am reminded of a discussion that another Tuskegeian and I were having with a group of white friends. The discussion had to do with our discovery of Hemingway (whom I discovered in a Negro barbershop) and Conrad (another writer I often discussed with Wright), and suddenly the Tuskegee graduate said to me, “Aren’t you glad that we found those guys on our own at Tuskegee?”

Now, that was not Negro chauvinism, but a meaningful observation about the relationship between social scene and experience, and I concurred. I had had the same reaction when I rst talked with Wright about ctional technique, and we had gone on to discuss some of the complications and interconnections between culture and society that claimed our conscious attention despite the fact that we were segregated. The question reminded me of how wonderful it was to have read T. S. Eliot in the context of Tuskegee. The question was not raised to celebrate a then segregated college in a violently segregated state, but to inform our white friends that racism aside, there are other important relationships between scenes, ideas and experience. Scene and circumstance combined to give ideas resonance, and to compel a consciousness of perspective. What one reads becomes part of what one sees and feels. Thus it is impossible for me to reread certain passages from Joyce or Eliot or Sir Thomas Browne without seeing once again the deep magenta skies that descend upon the Tuskegee campus at dusk in summer. The scene, then, is always a part of personality, and scene and personality combine to give viability to ideas. Scene is thus always a part, the ground, of action—and especially of *conscious* action. Its associations and implicit con icts provide the extra dimension which anchors poetry in reality and structures our e orts toward freedom.

Richard Wright was trying to add to our consciousness the dimension of being a black boy who grew up in Jackson, Mississippi (a scene that was not always so rugged, even for him, as he pictured it artistically), but a boy who grew up and who achieved through his reading a sense of what was possible out there in the wider world. A boy who grew up and achieved and accepted his own *individual* responsibility for seeing to it that America

become conscious of itself. He insisted that this country recognize the interconnections between its places and its personalities, its act and its ideals. This was the burden of Richard Wright, and, as I see it, the driving passion of Richard Wright. It led to his triumphs as it led, inevitably, to some of his defeats. But one thing must be said of Richard Wright: in him we had for the rst time a Negro American

writer as randy, as courageous and as irrepressible as Jack Johnson.

And if you don't know who Jack Johnson was, I'll tell you that when I was a little boy this early heavyweight boxing champion was one of the most admired underground heroes. He was rejected by most whites and by many respectable Negroes, but he was nevertheless a hero among veterans of the Spanish-American War who rejoiced in the skill and élan with which Johnson set o the now-outrageous search for a "White Hope."

This suggests that we literary people should always keep a sharp eye on what is happening in the unintellectualized areas of our experience. Our peripheral vision had better be damned good, because while baseball, basketball and football players cannot really tell us how to write our books, they *do* demonstrate where much of the signi cant action is taking place. Often they are themselves cultural heroes who are responsible for a powerful modi cation in American social attitudes. They tell us in nonliterary terms much about the nature of possibility. They tell us about the cost of success, and much about the nonpolitical aspects of racial and national identity, about the changing nature of social hierarchy, and about the role which individual skill and excellence can play in creating social change.

In this country there were good Negro writers before Wright arrived on the scene—and my respects to all of them—but it seems to me that Richard Wright wanted more and dared more. I think now as I o er you the memories of a middle-aged man, he was sometimes too passionate, but at least he wanted and demanded as much as any novelist, any artist should want: He wanted to be tested in terms of his talent, not in terms of his race or Mississippi upbringing. Rather he had the feeling that his vision of American life, and his ability to project it eloquently, justi ed his being considered among the best of American writers. And in this crazy, mixed-

up country, as is witnessed by this conference dedicated to his works and to his memory, it turns out that he was right.

Lecture presented at the Institute for Afro-American Culture, University of Iowa, July 18, 1971.

Homage to Duke Ellington on His Birthday IT is to marvel: the ageless and irrepressible Duke Ellington is seventy, and another piano player of note, President Richard M.

Nixon, has ordered in his honor a state dinner to be served in the house where, years ago, Duke's father, then a butler, once instructed white guests from the provinces in the gentle art and manners proper to such places of elegance and power. It is good news in these times of general social upheaval that traces of the old American success story remain valid, for now where the parent labored, the son is to be honored for his achievements. Perhaps it is inevitable that Duke Ellington should be shown the highest hospitality of the nation's First Family in its greatest house, and that through the courtesy of the chief of state all Americans may pay, symbolically, their respects to our greatest composer.

Perhaps it is also inevitable (and if not inevitable, certainly proper) that that which a Pulitzer Prize jury of a few years ago was too insecure or shortsighted to do, and that which our institutions dedicated to the recognition of artistic achievement have been too prejudiced, negligent or concerned with European models and styles to do, is nally being done by presidents. For it would seem that Ellington's greatness has been recognized by everyone except those charged with recognizing musical excellence at the highest levels, and even some of these have praised him privately while failing to grant him public honor.

Nevertheless, he is far from being a stranger to the White House, for during the occupancy of President and Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson, Ellington became something of a regular guest there; indeed, it was President Johnson who appointed him to the National Council on the Arts, thereby giving recognition to our most important indigenous art form in the person of its most outstanding creator.

Certainly there is no better indication that those on the highest

levels of governmental power have at last begun to recognize our arts and their creators as national treasures. Perhaps in Ellington's special case this is a proper and most tting path to o cial national recognition, since for more than forty years his music has been not only superb entertainment but an important function of national morale. During the Depression whenever his theme song "East St.

Louis Toodle-oo" came on the air, our morale was lifted by something inescapably hopeful in the sound. Its style was so triumphant and the moody melody so successful in capturing the times, yet so expressive of the faith which would see us through them. And when the "Black and Tan Fantasy" was played we were reminded not only of how eeting all human life must be, but in its blues-based tension between content and manner, it warned us not only to look at the darker side of life, but also to remember the enduring necessity for humor, technical mastery and creative excellence. It was immensely danceable and listenable music, and ever so evocative of other troubled times and other triumphs over disaster. It was also most Negro American in its mocking interpolations from Chopin's B-at minor piano concerto, to which, as Barry Ulanov has reminded us, it was once popular to sing the gallows-humored words: "Where shall we all *Be* A hundred years

/ From now?"

How many generations of Americans, white and black, wooed their wives and had the ceremonial moments of their high school and college days memorialized by Ellington's tunes? And to how many thousands has he de ned what it should mean to be young and alive and American? Yes, and to how many has he given a sense of personal elegance and style? A sense of possibility? And who, seeing and hearing Ellington and his marvelous band, hasn't been moved to wonder at the mysterious, unanalyzed character of the Negro American, and at the white American's inescapable Negroness?

Even though few recognized it, such artists as Ellington and Louis Armstrong were the stewards of our vaunted American optimism, and

guardians against the creeping irrationality which ever plagues our form of society. They created great entertainment, but for them

(ironically) and for us (unconsciously), their music was a rejection of that chaos and license which characterized the so-called Jazz Age associated with F. Scott Fitzgerald, and which has returned once more to haunt the nation. Place Ellington with Hemingway; they are both larger than life, both masters of that which is most enduring in the human enterprise: the power of man to de ne himself against the ravages of time through artistic style.

I remember Ellington from my high school days in Oklahoma City, rst as a strangely familiar timbre of orchestral sounds issuing from phonograph records and radio. Familiar because beneath the stylized jungle sounds (the like of which no African jungle had ever heard), there sounded the blues, and strange because the mutes, toilet plungers and derby hats with which I was acquainted as a musician had been given a stylized elegance and extension of e ect unheard of even in the music of Louis Armstrong. It was as though Ellington had taken the traditional instruments of Negro American music and modi ed them, extended their range and enriched their tonal possibilities. We were studying the classics then, working at harmony and the forms of symphonic music. While we a rmed the voice of jazz and the blues despite all criticism from our teachers because they spoke to a large extent of what we felt about the life we lived most intimately, it was not until the discovery of Ellington that we had any hint that jazz possessed possibilities of a range of expressiveness comparable to that of classical European music.

Then Ellington and his great orchestra came to town—came with their uniforms, their sophistication, their skills; their golden horns, their ights of controlled and disciplined fantasy; came with their art, their special sound; came with Ivy Anderson and Ethel Waters singing and dazzling the eye with their high-brown beauty and with the richness and bright feminine air of their costumes and promising manners. They were news from the great wide world, an example and a goal, and I wish that all those who write so knowledgeably about Negro boys having no masculine gures with whom to identify would consider the long national and international

career of Ellington and his band, and the thousands of one-night stands played in the black communities of this nation. Where in the white community, in *any* white community, could there have been found examples such as these? Who were so worldly, who so elegant, who so mockingly creative? Who were so skilled at their given trade and who treated the social limitations placed in their paths with greater disdain?

Friends of mine were already collecting Ellington records, and the more mature jazzmen were studying, without bene t of formal institutions of learning, his enigmatic style. Indeed, during the thirties and forties, when most aspiring writers of ction were learning from the style and example of Hemingway, many jazz composers, orchestrators and arrangers were following the example of Ellington, attempting to make something new and uniquely their own out of the traditional elements of the blues and jazz. For us Duke was a culture hero, a musical magician who worked his powers through his mastery of form, nuance and style, a charismatic gure whose personality in uenced even those who had no immediate concern with the art of jazz.

My mother, an Afro-American Methodist Episcopalian who shouted in church but who allowed me nevertheless to leave sunrise Christmas services to attend breakfast dances, once expressed the hope that when I had completed my musical studies I would have a band like Ellington's. I was pleased and puzzled at the time, but now I suspect that she recognized a certain religious element in Ellington's music, an element which has now blossomed forth in compositions of his own form of liturgical music. Either that, or she accepted the sound of dedication wherever she heard it, and thus was willing to see Duke as an example of the mysterious way in which God showed His face in music.

I did not meet Ellington at the time. I was only a young boy in the crowd who stood entranced around the bandstand at Slaughter's Hall. But a few years later, when I was a student in the music department at Tuskegee, I shook his hand and talked brie y with him of my studies and my dreams. He was kind and generous even though harassed (there had been some trouble in travel, and the

band had arrived hours late, with the instruments misplaced and the musicians evil as only tired, black, Northern-based musicians could be in the absurdly segregated South of the 1930s), and those of us who talked with him were renewed in our determination to make our names in music.

A few years later, a stranger in Harlem, I lived at the YMCA and spent many a homesick afternoon playing Duke's records on the jukebox in Small's Paradise Bar, asking myself why I was in New York and nding reassurance in the music. Although the way seemed cloudy (I had little money and would soon nd it necessary to sleep in the park below City College), I decided I should remain there and take my chances.

Later I met Langston Hughes, who took me up to Sugar Hill to visit the Duke in his apartment. Much to my delight, the great musician remembered me, was still apologetic because of the lateness of the band's arrival at Tuskegee, and asked me what he could do to aid the music department. I said that we were sadly de cient in our library of classical scores and recordings, and he o ered to make the school a gift of as extensive a library of recordings as was needed. It was an o er which I passed on to Tuskegee with great enthusiasm, but which, for some reason, perhaps because it had not come directly from Ellington himself, or perhaps because several people in the department regarded jazz as an inferior form of music, was rejected. That his was a genuine gesture I had no doubt, for at the time I was to see a further example of his generosity when Jimmie Lunceford's orchestra, then considered an Ellington rival, came on the radio. The other musicians present kidded Ellington about the challenge of Lunceford's group, to which he responded by listening intently until the number was nished and then commenting, "Those boys are interesting. They are trying, they are really trying," without a trace of condescension but with that enigmatic Ellington smile. The brief comment and the smile were enough; the kidding stopped, for we had all been listening, and not for the rst time, and we knew that Duke had little to fear from the challenge of Lunceford or anyone else.

Somewhere during his childhood a friend had nicknamed Edward Kennedy Ellington "Duke," and he had proceeded to create for himself a kingdom of sound and rhythm that has remained impregnable to the uctuations of fad and novelty, even to the death of key members of his band. Jazz styles have

come and gone, and other composer-conductors have been given the title “King of Jazz.” Duke knew the reason why, as did the world, just as he knew the value of his own creation, but he never complained; he simply smiled and made music. Now the other kings have departed, while his work endures and his creativity continues.

When the Pulitzer Prize committee refused to give him a special award for music (a decision which led certain members of the committee to resign), Ellington remarked, “Fate is being kind to me.

Fate doesn’t want me to be too famous too young,” a quip as mocking of our double standards, hypocrisies, and pretensions as the dancing of those slaves who, looking through the windows of a plantation manor house from the yard, imitated the steps so gravely performed by the masters within and then added to them their own special air, burlesquing the white folks and then going on to force the steps into a choreography uniquely their own. The whites, looking out at the activity in the yard, thought that they were being attered by imitation, and were amused by the incongruity of tattered blacks dancing courtly steps, while missing completely the fact that before their eyes a European cultural form was becoming Americanized, undergoing a metamorphosis through the mocking activity of a people partially sprung from Africa. So, blissfully unaware, the whites laughed while the blacks danced out their mocking reply.

In a country which began demanding the projection of its own unique experience in literature as early as the 1820s, it was ironic that American composers were expected to master the traditions, conventions and subtleties of European music, and to force their own American musical sense of life into the forms created by Europe’s greatest composers. Thus the history of American classical

music has been marked by a struggle to force American experience into European forms.

In other words, our most highly regarded musical standards remained those of the Europe from which the majority of Americans derived. Fortunately, however, not all Americans spring from Europe (or not only from Europe), and while these standards obtained, Negro American composers were not

really held to them, since it seemed obvious that blacks had nothing to do with Europe—

even though during slavery Negroes had made up comic verses about a dance to which “Miss Rose come in her mistress’s clothes /

But how she got them nobody knows *And long before the ball did meet* She was dancing Taglioni at the corner of the street,”

Taglioni being a dancer who was the rage of Europe during the 1850s.

Be that as it may, the dominance of European standards did work a hardship on the Negro American composer because it meant that no matter how inventive he might become, his music would not be considered important, or even American (1) because of his race and (2) because of the form, if he was a jazzman, in which he worked.

Therefore a composer such as Ellington was at odds with European music and its American representatives, just as he was at odds with the racial attitudes of the majority of the American population, and while primarily a creative composer, he was seen mainly in his role as entertainer. Doubtless this explains the withholding from Ellington of the nation’s highest honors.

It isn’t a matter of being protected, as Duke suggests, from being too famous too young—he is one of the world’s most famous composers and is recognized by the likes of Stravinsky, Stokowski and Milhaud as one of the greatest moderns—but the fact that his creations are far too *American*. There is also the fact of Ellington’s aura of mockery. Mockery speaks through his work and bearing. He is one of the most handsome of men, and to many his stage manners are so suave and gracious that they appear a put-on—which quite often they are. His manner, like his work, serves to remind us of the inadequacies of our myths, legends, conduct and standards.

However, Ellington’s is a creative mockery in that it rises above

itself to o er us something better, more creative and hopeful, than we’ve attained while seeking other standards.

During a period when groups of young English entertainers who based their creations on the Negro American musical tradition have e ected a questionable revolution of manners among American youths, perhaps it is time we paid our respects to a man who has spent his life reducing the violence and chaos of American life to artistic order. I have no idea where we will all be a hundred years from now, but if there is a classical music in which the American experience has nally discovered the voice of its own complexity, it will owe much of its direction to the achievements of Edward Kennedy Ellington. For many years he has been telling us how marvelous, mad, violent, hopeful, nostalgic and (perhaps) decent we are. He is one of the musical fathers of our country, and throughout all these years he has, as he tells us so mockingly, loved us madly.

We are privileged to have lived during his time and to have known so great a man, so great a musician.

From *The Sunday Star* (Washington, D.C.), April 27, 1969.

The Art of Romare Bearden

I regard the weakening of the importance given to objects as the capital transformation of Western art. In painting, it is clear that a painting of Picasso's is less and less a "canvas," and more and more the mark of some discovery, a stake left to indicate the place through which a restless genius has passed…

—André Malraux

THIS series of collages and projections by Romare Bearden represents a triumph of a special order. Springing from a dedicated painter's unending e orts to master the techniques of illusion and revelation which are so important to the craft of painting, they are also the result of Bearden's search for fresh methods to explore the plastic possibilities of Negro American experience. What is special about Bearden's achievement is, it seems to me, the manner in which he has made his dual explorations serve one another, the way in which his technique has been used to discover and trans gure its object. In keeping with the special nature of his search, and by the self-imposed "rules of the game," it was necessary that the methods

arrived at be such as would allow him to express the tragic predicament of his people without violating his passionate dedication to art as a fundamental and transcendent agency for confronting and revealing the world.

To have done this successfully is not only to have added a dimension to the technical resourcefulness of art, but to have modi ed our way of experiencing reality. It is also to have had a most successful encounter with a troublesome social anachronism which, while nding its existence in areas lying beyond the special province of the artist, has nevertheless caused great confusion among many painters of Bearden's social background. I say *social*, for although Bearden is by self-a rmation no less than by public identi cation a Negro American, the quality of his *artistic* culture

can by no means be conveyed by that term. Nor does it help to apply the designation "black" (even more amorphous for conveying a sense of cultural complexity), and since such terms tell us little about the unique individuality of the artist or anyone else, it is well to have them out in the open where they can cause the least confusion.

What, then, do I mean by anachronism? I refer to that imbalance in American society which leads to a distorted perception of social reality, to a stubborn blindness to the creative possibilities of cultural diversity, to the prevalence of negative myths, racial stereotypes and dangerous illusions about art, humanity and society.

Arising from an initial failure of social justice, this anachronism divides social groups along lines that are no longer tenable, while fostering hostility, anxiety and fear, and in the area to which we now address ourselves it has had the damaging e ect of alienating many Negro artists from the traditions, techniques and theories indigenous to the arts through which they aspire to achieve themselves.

Thus in the eld of culture, where their freedom of self-de nition is at a maximum, and where the techniques of artistic self-expression are most abundantly available, such artists are so fascinated by the power of their anachronistic social imbalance as to limit their e orts to describing its manifold dimensions and its apparent invincibility against change. Indeed,

they take it as a major theme and focus for their attention, and they allow it to dominate their thinking about themselves, their people, their country and their art. But while many are convinced that simply to recognize social imbalance is enough to put it to riot, few achieve anything like artistic mastery, and most fail miserably through a single-minded e ort to “tell it like it is.”

Sadly, however, the problem for the plastic artist is not one of

“telling” at all, but of *revealing* that which has been concealed by time, custom and our trained incapacity to perceive the truth. Thus it is a matter of destroying moribund images of reality and creating the new. Further, for the true artist, working from the top of his times and out of a conscious concern with the most challenging

possibilities of his form, the unassimilated and anachronistic—

whether in the shape of motif, technique or image—is abhorrent evidence of conceptual and/or technical failure, of challenges unmet. Although he may ignore the anachronistic through a preoccupation with other pressing details, he can never be satis ed simply by placing it within a frame. For once there, it becomes the symbol of all that is not art and a mockery of his powers of creation.

So at his best he struggles to banish the anachronistic element from his canvas by converting it into an element of style, a device of his personal vision.

As Bearden demonstrated here so powerfully, it is of the true artist’s nature and mode of action to dominate all the world and time through technique and vision. His mission is to bring a new visual order into the world, and through his art he seeks to reset society’s clock by imposing upon it his own method of de ning the times. The urge to do this determines the form and character of his social responsibility, spurs his restless exploration for plastic possibilities, and accounts to a large extent for his creative aggressiveness.

But it is here precisely that the aspiring Negro painter so often falters. Trained by the circumstances of his social predicament to a habit (no matter how reluctant) of accommodation, such an attitude toward the world seems quixotic. He is, he feels, only one man, and the conditions which thwart his freedom are of such enormous dimensions as to appear unconquerable by purely plastic means, even at the hands of the most highly trained, gifted and arrogant artist. “Turn Picasso into a Negro and *then* let me see how far he can go,” he will tell you, because he feels an irremediable con ict between his identity as a member of an embattled social minority and his freedom as an artist. He cannot avoid, nor should he wish to avoid, his group identity, but he ounders before the question of how his group’s experience might be given statement through the categories of a nonverbal form of art which has been consciously exploring its own unique possibilities for many decades before he appeared on the scene. It is a self-assertive and irreverent art which abandoned long ago the task of mere representation to photography

and the role of storytelling to the masters of the comic strip and the cinema. Nor can he draw upon his folk tradition for a simple answer. Beginning with the Bible and proceeding all the way through the spirituals, blues, novels, poems and the dance, Negro Americans have depended upon the element of narrative for both entertainment and group identi cation. Further, it has been those who have o ered an answer to the question, always crucial in the lives of a repressed minority, of who and what they are in the most simpli ed and graphic terms who have won their highest praise and admiration. Unfortunately there seems to be (the African past notwithstanding) no speci cally Negro American tradition of plastic design to o er him support.

How then, he asks himself, does even an artist steeped in the most advanced lore of his craft and most passionately concerned with solving the more advanced problems of painting *as painting* address himself to the perplexing question of bringing his art to bear upon the task (never so urgent as now) of de ning Negro American identity, and of pressing its claims for recognition and for justice?

He feels, in brief, a near-unresolvable con ict between his urge to leave his mark upon the world through art and his ties to his group and its claims upon him.

Fortunately for them and for us, Romare Bearden has faced these questions for himself, and since he is an artist whose social consciousness is no less intense than his dedication to art, his example is of utmost importance for all who are concerned with grasping something of the complex interrelations between race, culture and the individual artist as they exist in the United States.

Bearden is aware that for Negro Americans these are times of eloquent protest and intense struggle, times of rejection and rede nition, but he also knows that all this does little to make the question of the relation of the Negro artist to painting any less di cult. If the cries in the street are to nd e ective statement on canvas, they must undergo a metamorphosis. In painting, Bearden has recently observed, there is little room for the lachrymose, for self-pity or raw complaint, and if they are to nd a place in painting, this can only be accomplished by infusing them with the

freshest sensibility of the times as it nds existence in the elements of painting.

During the late thirties when I rst became aware of Bearden's work, he was painting scenes of the Depression in a style strongly in uenced by the Mexican muralists. This work was powerful, the scenes grim and brooding, and through his depiction of unemployed workingmen in Harlem he was able, while evoking the Southern past, to move beyond the usual protest painting of this period to reveal something of the universal elements of an abiding human condition. By striving to depict the times, by reducing scene, character and atmosphere to a style, he caught something of both the universality of Harlem life and the "harlemness" of the national human predicament.

I recall that later, under the dual in uences of Hemingway and the poetic tragedy of Federico García Lorca, Bearden created a voluminous series of drawings and paintings inspired by Lorca's *Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías*. He had become interested in myth and ritual as potent forms for

ordering human experience, and it would seem that by stepping back from the immediacy of the Harlem experience, which he knew both from boyhood and as a social worker, he was freed to give expression to the essentially poetic side of his vision. The products of this period were marked by a palette which, in contrast with the somber colors of the earlier work and despite the tragic theme with its underlying allusions to Christian rite and mystery, was brightly sensual. But despite their having been consciously in uenced by the compositional patterns of the Italian primitives and Dutch masters, these works were also resolutely abstract.

It was as though Bearden had decided that in order to possess his world artistically, he had to confront it not through propaganda or sentimentality, but through the nest techniques and traditions of painting. He sought to recreate his Harlem in the light of his painter's vision, and thus avoided the defeats su ered by many of the aspiring painters of this period who seemed to have felt that they had only to reproduce, out of a mood of protest and despair,

the scenes and surfaces of Harlem in order to win artistic mastery and accomplish social trans guration.

It would seem that for many Negro painters even the *possibility* of translating Negro American experience into the modes and conventions of modern painting went unrecognized. This was, in part, the result of an agonizing xation upon the racial mysteries and social realities dramatized by color, facial structure and the texture of Negro skin and hair. Again, many aspiring artists clung with protective compulsiveness to the myth of the Negro American's total alienation from the larger American culture—a culture which he helped to create in the areas of music and literature, and where in the area of painting he has appeared from the earliest days of the nation as a symbolic gure—and allowed the realities of their social and political situation to determine their conception of their role and freedom as artists.

To accept this form of the myth was to accept its twin variants, one of which holds that there is a pure mainstream of American culture which is "unpolluted" by any trace of Negro American style or idiom, and the other (propagated currently by the exponents of *Négritude)* which holds that

Western art is basically racist, and thus anything more than a cursory knowledge of its techniques and history is irrelevant to the Negro artist. In other words, the Negro American who aspired to the title “artist” was too often restricted by sociological notions of racial separatism, and these appear not only to have restricted his use of artistic freedom, but to have limited his curiosity about the abundant resources made available to him by those restless and assertive agencies of the artistic imagination which we call technique and conscious culture.

Indeed, it has been said that these disturbing works of Bearden’s (which literally erupted during a tranquil period of abstract painting) began quite innocently as a demonstration to a group of Negro painters. He was suggesting some of the possibilities through which commonplace materials could be forced to undergo a creative metamorphosis when manipulated by some of the nonrepresentational techniques available to the resourceful craftsman. The step from collage to projection followed naturally,

since Bearden had used it during the early forties as a means of studying the works of such early masters as Giotto and de Hooch.

That he went on to become fascinated with the possibilities lying in such “found” materials is both an important illustrative instance for younger painters and a source for our delight and wonder.

Bearden knows that regardless of the individual painter’s personal history, taste or point of view, he must nevertheless pay his materials the respect of approaching them through a highly conscious awareness of the resources and limitations of the form to which he has dedicated his creative energies. One suspects also that as an artist possessing a marked gift for pedagogy, Bearden has sought here to reveal a world long hidden by the clichés of sociology and rendered cloudy by the distortions of newsprint and the false continuity imposed upon our conception of Negro life by television and much documentary photography. Therefore, as he delights us with the magic of design and teaches us the ambiguity of vision, Bearden insists that we see in depth and by the fresh light of his creative vision. He knows that the true complexity of the slum dweller and the tenant farmer requires a release from the prison of our media-dulled perception and a reassembling

in forms which would convey something of the depth and wonder of the Negro American's stubborn humanity.

Being aware that the true artist destroys the accepted world by way of revealing the unseen, and creating that which is new and uniquely his own, Bearden has used Cubist techniques to his own ingenious e ect. His mask-faced Harlemites and tenant farmers set in their mysteriously familiar but emphatically abstract scenes are nevertheless resonant of artistic and social history. Without compromising their integrity as elements in plastic compositions, his gures are expressive of a complex reality lying beyond their frames. While functioning as integral elements of design, they serve simultaneously as signs and symbols of a humanity that has struggled to survive the decimating and fragmentizing e ects of American social processes. Here faces which draw upon the abstract character of African sculpture for their composition are made to focus our attention upon the far from abstract reality of a people.

Here abstract interiors are presented in which concrete life is acted out under repressive conditions. Here too the poetry of the blues is projected through synthetic forms which visually are in themselves tragicomic and eloquently poetic. A harsh poetry this, but poetry nevertheless, with the nostalgic imagery of the blues conceived as visual form, image, pattern and symbol—including the familiar trains (evoking partings and reconciliations) and the conjure women (who appear in these works with the ubiquity of the witches who haunt the drawing of Goya) who evoke the abiding mystery of the enigmatic women who people the blues. Here too are renderings of those rituals of rebirth and dying, of baptism and sorcery which give ceremonial continuity to the Negro American community.

By imposing his vision upon scenes familiar to us all, Bearden reveals much of the universally human which they conceal. Through his creative assemblage he makes complex comments upon history, society and the nature of art. Indeed, his Harlem becomes a place inhabited by people who have in fact been *resurrected*, recreated by art, a place composed of visual puns and artistic allusions where the sacred and profane, reality and dream are ambiguously mingled.

Resurrected with them in the guise of fragmented ancestral gures and forgotten gods (really masks of the instincts, hopes, emotions, aspirations and dreams) are those powers that now surge in our land with a potentially destructive force which springs from the very fact of their having for so long gone unrecognized and unseen.

Bearden doesn't impose these powers upon us by explicit comment, but his ability to make the unseen manifest allows us some insight into the forces which now clash and rage as Negro Americans seek self-de nition in the slums of our cities. There is beauty here, a harsh beauty that asserts itself out of the horrible fragmentation which Bearden's subjects and their environment have undergone. But, as I have said, there is no preaching; these forces have been brought to eye by formal art. These works take us from Harlem through the South of tenant farms and northward-bound trains to tribal Africa; our mode of conveyance consists of every device which has claimed Bearden's artistic attention, from the oversimpli ed and scanty images of Negroes that appear in our ads

and photojournalism, to the discoveries of the School of Paris and the Bauhaus. He has used the discoveries of Giotto and Pieter de Hooch no less than those of Juan Gris, Picasso, Schwitters and Mondrian (who was no less fascinated by the visual possibilities of jazz than by the compositional rhythms of the early Dutch masters), and he has discovered his own uses for the metaphysical richness of African sculptural forms. In brief, Bearden has used—and most playfully—all of his artistic knowledge and skill to create a curve of plastic vision which reveals to us something of the mysterious complexity of those who dwell in our urban slums. But his is the eye of a painter, not a sociologist, and here the elegant architectural details which exist in a setting of gracious but neglected streets, and the buildings in which the hopeful and the hopeless live cheek by jowl, where failed human wrecks and the con dently expectant explorers of the frontiers of human possibility are crowded together as incongruously as the explosive details in a Bearden canvas—all this comes across plastically and with a freshness of impact that employs neither sociological cliché nor raw protest.

Where any number of painters have tried to project the "prose" of Harlem, a task performed more successfully by photographers, Bearden has

concentrated upon releasing its poetry, abiding rituals and ceremonies of a rmation, creating a surreal poetry compounded of vitality and powerlessness, destructive impulse and the all-pervading and enduring faith in their own style of American humanity. Through his faith in the powers of art to reveal the unseen through the seen, his collages have transcended their immaculateness as plastic constructions. Or to put it another way, Bearden's meaning is identical with his method. His combination of technique is in itself eloquent of the sharp breaks, leaps in consciousness, distortions, paradoxes, reversals, telescoping of time and surreal blending of styles, values, hopes and dreams which characterize much of Negro American history. Through an act of creative will, he has blended strange visual harmonies out of the shrill, indigenous dichotomies of American life, and in doing so has re ected the irrepressible thrust of a people to endure and keep its intimate sense of its own identity.

Bearden seems to have told himself that in order to possess the meaning of his Southern childhood and Northern upbringing, and to keep his memories, dreams and values whole, he would have to recreate and humanize them by reducing them to artistic style. Thus in the poetic sense these works give plastic expression to a vision in which the socially grotesque conceals a tragic beauty, and they embody Bearden's interrogation of the empirical values of a society that mocks its own ideals through a blindness induced by its myth of race. All this, ironically, by a man who visually, at least (he is light-skinned and perhaps more Russian than "black" in appearance), need never have been restricted to the social limitations imposed upon easily identi ed Negroes. Bearden's art is therefore not only an a rmation of his own freedom and responsibility as an individual and artist, but is an a rmation of the irrelevance of the notion of race as a limiting force in the arts. These are works of a man possessing a rare lucidity of vision.

The introduction in the catalogue *Romare Bearden: Paintings and Projections* for an exhibition held at the Art Gallery of the State University of New York at Albany, November 25–December 22, 1968. Reprinted in *The Massachusetts Review,* Winter 1977.

Society, Morality and the Novel SURELY it would be of more value for a novelist to write novels than to spend his energies discussing The Novel, for

by carrying out his chosen task there he has the possibility of moving beyond the given level of either his talent or his cold perception of life's meaning—of

"playing beyond his game," as it were, and thus achieving for himself and for his readers some new insight into the human predicament, some new facet of human possibility. By risking the unknown which appears whenever he follows the lead of his imagination as driven by his hopes and his fears, he has the chance of achieving the signi cantly new and thus becoming himself a part of that which he achieves. While on the other hand, theorizing about the form, function, and *raison d'être* of the novel leads him straightway into the elds of social and aesthetic criticism, the domain of specialists. Here he is circumscribed by rules which are alien to his obsessive need to play with the res of chaos and to rearrange reality to the patterns of his imagination. While it is the drive of the critic to create systems of thought, it is that of the novelist to recreate reality in the forms which his personal vision assumes as it plays and struggles with the vividly illusory "eidetic-like" imagery left in the mind's eye by the process of social change.

Life for the novelist is a game of hide-and-seek in which he is eternally the sometimes delighted but more often frustrated "it."

Critics are, on the whole, more "adult" types. They share a liking for order, and have little patience with dashing about trying to pin down the multiple illusions projected by life with arbitrary ones of one's arrogant own; it is their function to dispense with that annoying characteristic of life with the bright pure light of their methods. The novelist must take chances or die, while the critic would make it unnecessary to do so. Critics would give you the formula that would make the achievement of a major ction as

certain as making a pre-mixed apple pie. They analyze, they classify, they man the lines of continuity linking present developments with past achievements of the form, and with their specialized knowledge they compose the novelists' most sensitively aware audience—or so we have long been accustomed to regarding them. Presently we shall take a closer look at just how contemporary ction criticism mediates between the American novelist and the American reader, but here let us simply observe

that novelists have, for the most part, been content to keep out of the critics' domain. They either con ne those critical formulations necessary to the clari cation of their own artistic purposes to their notebooks, or they have used them to give substance to occasional book reviews. Most often they have merely played them by ear as they went about composing speci c works of ction. And for good reason.

Actually, the best way for a novelist to discuss the problem of The Novel is in the form of *a speci c novel*, for whenever ctional technique makes conjunction with an image of reality, each is mutually transformed. Every serious novel is, beyond its immediate thematic preoccupations, a discussion of the craft, a conquest of the form, a con ict with its di culties and a pursuit of its felicities and beauty. To engage in this by way of getting at speci c aspects of experience is di cult enough to do to keep the novelists busy, but today, with some of our more important critics handing down the death sentence of the form (though in their solemn "The novel is dead," there sounds a Platonist "*Let* it be dead"), or when they boast left-handedly in print of their loss of interest in contemporary novels, the novelist is feinted into a position of defending his craft.

If he is to pay the critics the serious attention which certainly a few of them deserve, and if he is at all interested in winning those readers who would listen to the critics, he is moved to attempt some broad public formulation of his personal approach to his craft. One writes because one wishes to be read on one's own terms; thus, since the critics dismiss the novel as moribund, a bit of explicit communication between the novelist and his prospective readers is in order. He must prepare to play Antony to the novel's Caesar, for truly an act of assassination has been commissioned. Nor is this all,

for a question of personal dignity and rationality is raised. If the critics are correct—and some are so persuaded—how then does the novelist justify, even to himself, his passionate involvement with a literary form which is dead? Why does he pour his energies into a form that dooms his best e orts to dust even before the e ort of the imagination takes place, and upon what does he base his faith?

But rst an attempt at de nition, which inasmuch as such de nition represents the general assumptions out of which I personally approach the abstract form, it will make up for what it lacks in precision with its validity as autobiography.

Let us begin by mentioning a characteristic of the novel which seems so obvious that it is seldom mentioned, and which as a consequence tends to make most discussions of the form irritatingly abstract: by its nature the novel seeks to communicate a vision of experience. Therefore, whatever else it achieves artistically, it is basically a form of communication. When successful in communicating its vision of experience, that magic thing occurs between the world of the novel and the reader—indeed, between reader and reader in their mutual solitude—which we know as communion. As with all the ctive arts, the novel's medium of communication consists in a familiar experience occurring among a particular people, within a particular society or nation (the novel is bound up with the notion of nationhood), and it achieves its universality, if at all, through accumulating images of reality and arranging them in patterns of universal signi cance. It is not, like poetry, concerned primarily with words, but with action depicted in words, and it operates by amplifying and giving resonance to a speci c complex of experience until, through the eloquence of its statement, that speci c part of life speaks metaphorically for the whole.

The novel can communicate with us only by appealing to that which we know, through actual experience or through literature, to be the way things occur. "Yes, this is how it is," we tell ourselves when the ctive illusion works its spell—or we say, "Yes, but such and such is left out." Thus, between the novelist and his most receptive reader (really a most necessary collaborator who must

participate in bringing the ction into life), there must exist a body of shared assumptions concerning reality and necessity, possibility and freedom, personality and value, along with a body of feelings, both rational and irrational, which arise from the particular circumstances of their mutual society. Even the technical means through which this collaboration is brought about depends upon the reader's acceptance of a set of artistic conventions, those "once upon a time" devices which announce the telling

of a tale and which introduce a mood of receptiveness in the reader, and through which alone the novelist is able to bring his ction alive. Even surrealism depended for its e ects upon those who were initiated into its conventions and who shared its assumptions concerning art and value. It is by appealing to our sense of experience and playing upon our shared assumptions that the novelist is able to reveal to us that which we do not know—that is, the unfamiliar within the familiar—

and a rm that which we assume to be truth, and to reveal to us his own hard-won vision of truth.

In this sense the novel is rhetorical. Whatever else it tries to do, it must do so by persuading us to accept the novelist's projection of an experience which, on some level or mixtures of levels, we have shared with him, and through which we become empathetically involved in the illusory and plotted depiction of life which we identify as ctional art. We repay the novelist in terms of our admiration to the extent that he intensi es our sense of the real—or, conversely, *to the extent that he justi es our desire to evade certain aspects of reality which we nd unpleasant beyond the point of confrontation*.

In the beginning was not only the word but the contradiction of the word; sometimes we approach life out of a tragic sense of necessity, and again out of its denial. In this lies the novel's exibility and its ability to transcend the bounds of class and nation, its endless possibilities of mutation. It is rooted in man's most permanent feelings, and it brings into full vision the processes of his current social forms. This is almost enough in itself to keep the novelist at his task, for in it lies the possibility of a rmation and personal de nition.

As an art form the novel is obsessed by the relationship between illusion and reality as revealed in duration and process. "All poetry,"

writes Malraux, "implies the destruction of the relationship between things that seems obvious to us in favor of particular relationships imposed by the poet." Thus the novel seeks to take the surface

“facts” of experience and arrange them in such ways that for a magic moment reality comes into sharp and signi cant focus. I believe that the primary social function of the novel (the function from which it takes its form and which brought it into being) is that of seizing from the ux and ow of our daily lives those abiding patterns of experience which, through their repetition and consequences in our a airs, help to form our sense of reality, and from which emerge our sense of humanity and our conception of human value.

More than any other literary form, the novel is obsessed with the impact of change upon personality. It was no mere historical accident that the novel came into prominence during the eighteenth century, or that it became fully conscious of itself as an art form during the nineteenth. Its appearance marked the ful llment of a social need that arose out of the accelerated process of historical change. Before the eighteenth century, when man was relatively at home in what seemed to be a stable and well-ordered world (and if not well ordered, stable nevertheless), there was little need for this change-obsessed literary form. Nor was there literacy enough, nor was the individual, tied as he was to an order imposed by religion and kingship, isolated enough. Nor was individual selfconsciousness su ciently widespread. Human beings were agreed both about what constituted reality and about what the limits of human possibility were, and social change—one of our key words to the understanding of the novel—was by no means the problem it became during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nor is it accidental that it was during the nineteenth century that the novel revealed itself as the most exible art form for dealing with social change. When the middle class broke the bounds of the feudal synthesis and took its fustian stance, such a literary form was needed, and the novel was

the answer. It is here that the novel assumed the role which makes it so useful today: it thrives on change and social turbulence.

Vaguely at rst, an awareness had grown in men’s minds that social reality had cut loose from its traditional base, and that new possibilities of experience and new forms of personality had been born into the awfully expanded world. Old class lines were being liquidated, and new lines were being formed and broken and reformed; new types of men were arising

mysteriously out of a whirling social reality which revealed itself protean in its ability to change its appearance and its alignments rapidly, ruthless in its impiety toward old images of order, toward traditional modes of behavior. This is of course to telescope many things; there were several phases of the novel and many variations on the form, from the picaresque to the more stable and re ned novel of manners, from the sociology-obsessed novel to the Flaubertian “art” novel.

Nevertheless, the form attempted to deal with the disparate experiences which society now threw up, and it tried to synthesize these disparate elements. Often quite consciously, and by way of being sheer narrative entertainment, it created new values, a rmed those values which endured speci c social changes, and rejected those acts and ideals which threatened middle-class society.

Perhaps the novel evolved in order to deal with man’s growing awareness that behind the façade of social organization, manners, customs, myths, rituals and religions of the post-Christian era lies chaos. Man knows, despite the certainties which it is the psychological function of his social institutions to give him, that he did not create the universe, and that the universe is not at all concerned with human values. Man knows even in this day of marvelous technology and the tenuous subjugation of the atom, that nature can crush him, and that at the boundaries of human order the arts and the instruments of technology are hardly more than magic objects which serve to aid us in our ceaseless quest for certainty. We cannot live, as someone has said, in the contemplation of chaos, but neither can we live without an awareness of chaos, and the means through which we achieve that awareness, and through which we assert our humanity most signi cantly against it,

is in great art. In our time the most articulate art form for de ning ourselves and for asserting our humanity is the novel. Certainly it is our most rational art form for dealing with the irrational.

In the nineteenth century, during the moment of greatest middle-class stability—a stability found actually only at the center, and there only relatively, in England and not in the colonies, in Paris rather than in Africa, for there the baser instincts, the violence and greed could destroy and

exploit non-European societies in the name of humanism and culture, beauty and liberty, fraternity and equality while protecting the humanity of those at home—the novel reached its rst high point of formal selfconsciousness. Appropriated by the middle class (for such art forms are the creation of total civilizations, not of a single class), it was characterized by an expansiveness which re ected a class of people who had learned to live with the tempo of change and to absorb the e ects of change into its frame of existence. It also marked the course of its development and charted the health of its ideals. Perhaps we admire the nineteenth-century European novel today, in our time of frantic uncertainty, because we nd it vibrant and alive and con dently able to confront good and evil in all their contradictory entanglement. In it was implicit the tragic realization that the treasure of possibility is always to be found in the cave of chaos, guarded by the demons of destruction.

It is Abel Magwitch, the jailbird, who makes Pip's dream of a gentleman's life a reality in *Great Expectations*, just as it was the existence of human slavery and colonial exploitation which made possible many of the brighter achievements of modern civilization.

Likewise, the muted insincerities and snobberies of Jane Austen's characters are only highly re ned versions of those major insincerities and snobberies, connected with the exercise of power, which have led in our time to the steady crumbling of the empire upon which genteel English society has rested. In that moment of genteel stability, however, those who were most willfully aware of their destiny viewed freedom not simply in terms of necessity, but in terms of possibility, and they were willing to take the risks necessary to attain their goals. It was the novel which could

communicate people's awareness of this sense of possibility along with its cost, and it was the novel which could, on the other hand, reconstruct an image of experience which would make it unnecessary for one to be aware of the true reality upon which society rested. Men, it is said, can stand reality in small doses only, and the novel, sometimes consciously, sometimes not, has measured out that dosage.

This was the dark side of the novel's ability to forge images which would strengthen man's will to say no to chaos and a rm him in his task of

humanizing himself and the world. It would, even while entertaining him, help create that fragile state of human certainty and stability (or the illusion of it at least, for perhaps illusion is all we ever have) and communion which is sometimes called love, brotherhood, democracy, or sometimes simply the good life. It could limit those who would share that life and justify our rejection of their humanity, and while condemning snobbery, could yet condone it, for society was admittedly hieratic and closed to pressure from below.

Enough of general de nition: if the novel had not existed at the time the United States started becoming conscious of itself as a nation—a process still, fortunately, for ourselves and the world, unachieved—

it would have been necessary for Americans to invent it. For in no other country was change such a given factor of existence; in no other country were the class lines so uid and change so swift and continuous *and intentional*. In no other country were men so conscious of having de ned their social aims, or so committed to working toward making that de nition a reality. Indeed, a conscious awareness of values describes the condition of the American experiment, and often much of our energy goes into nding ways of losing that consciousness. In the beginning was not only the word, but its contradiction.

I would be on dangerous ground if I tried to trace too closely a connection between documents of state and literature, since in literature universality is an accepted aim; yet the novel is an art of

the speci c, and for my own working orientation this connection exists in the United States beyond all questions of cultural chauvinism. Certainly this is evident in our great nineteenth-century novels. The moral imperatives of American life that are implicit in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights were a part of both the individual consciousness and the conscience of those writers who created what we consider our classic novels—Hawthorne, Melville, James and Twain—and for all the hooky-playing attitude of the twenties or the political rebelliousness of the thirties, and the reluctance of contemporary writers to deal explicitly with politics, they still are. They are in fact the ba e against which Lionel Trilling's "hum and buzz of implication" (his understandably

vague de nition of manners in the novel) sound. These documents form the ground of assumptions upon which our social values rest; they inform our language and our conduct with public meaning, and they provide the broadest frame of reference for our most private dramas. One might deliberately overemphasize and say that most prose ction in the United States

—even the most banal bedroom farce or the most rare ed, stylized and understated comedy of manners—is basically "about" the values and cost of living in a democracy. Being an American, wrote Henry James, is a complex fate, but perhaps far more troublesome than the necessity of guarding against superstitious Overevaluation of Europe is the problem of dealing with the explicitness of the omnipresent American ideal. Out of the consciously experimental and revolutionary origins of the country has grown the obsession with de ning the American experience— rst in order to distinguish it from that of Europe, and now to determine our uniqueness as a civilization and our proper historical role among nations. The impetus was twofold: the need to achieve national selfconsciousness being, from the beginning, a political goal springing from our rejection of European social forms, and along with this the pressure of our broad cultural diversi cation brought about by the open character of the society, the waves of immigration and the rapid expansion, horizontally along the frontier and then vertically through the processes of urbanization and industrialization.

Out of this came our most urgent problem of identity, and who and what is American are still perplexing questions even today.

Many de nitions are o ered—in naturalistic art, in *Life* picture portfolios of the American woman, in government photographs of American workers (in which one seldom sees a Negro), in the racial and aesthetic types of movie queens, in works of sociology, in attempts to depict aspects of the American experience in novels—

but few are acceptable without quali cation, not even during wartime. All Americans are in this sense members of minority groups, even Anglo-Saxons, whose image has from the beginning dominated all the rest, and one meaning of the social friction in American life is the struggle of each racial, cultural and religious group to have its own contribution to the

national image recognized and accepted. The novelist can bemoan this pressure, for it can be oppressive, but he cannot escape it; indeed, in our time it might be his road to a meaningful relationship to the community. “Who,”

asks Constance Rourke in *her American Humor*, “ever heard of a signi cant English novel called *The Englishman*, or an excellent French novel called *Le Français*? The simple aggressive stress belonged to an imagination perennially engaged by the problem of the national type.…”

Moreover, this national need gives us a clue to one of the enduring functions of the American novel, which is that of de ning the national type as it evolves in the turbulence of change, and of giving the American experience, as it unfolds in its diverse parts and regions, imaginative integration and moral continuity. Thus it is bound up with our problem of nationhood. During the nineteenth century it was clearly recognized by those writers who speak meaningfully to us today, and it comes through novels which in their own times went, like *Moby-Dick*, unread. *Moby-Dick*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Bostonians* are all “regional”

novels; each simultaneously projects an image of a speci c phase of American life, and each is concerned with the moral predicament of the nation. For all the optimism of the early years, there was in this literature no easy a rmation, and for all its involvement with a common set of political and social assumptions, there was, as the list

makes plain, no lack of variety of theme. It has been observed that modern American ction is the only body of literature which is not the work of intellectuals; yet from the beginning our novelists have been consciously concerned with the form, technique, and content of the novel, not excluding ideas. What the observer (a Frenchman) missed was that the major ideas of our society were so alive in the minds of every reader that they could be stated implicitly in the contours of the form. For it is grounded in a body of the most abstract and explicitly stated conceptions of human society, and one which in the form of the great documents of state constitutes a body of assumptions about human possibility which is shared by all Americans, even those who resist violently any attempt to embody them in social action.

Indeed, these assumptions have been questioned and resisted from the very beginning, for man cannot simply say, “Let us have liberty, justice and equality for all,” and have it. More than any other system, a democracy is always pregnant with its contradiction. This contradiction was to erupt in the Civil War, an event which has had a profound e ect upon the direction of our ction and which continues to in uence our thinking about the novel far more than we bother to recognize. It marked an interruption of our moral continuity, and the form of our novels changed as a result.

As Henry James wrote in his study of Hawthorne:

The subsidence of that great convulsion has left a di erent tone from the tone it found, and one may say that the Civil War marks an era in the history of the American mind. It introduced into the national consciousness a certain sense of proportion and relation, of the world being a more complicated place than it had hitherto seemed, the future more treacherous, success more di cult. At the rate at which things are going, it is obvious that good Americans will be more numerous than ever; but the good American, in days to come, will be a more critical person than his complacent and con dent grandfather. He has eaten of the tree of knowledge. He will not, I think, be a sceptic, and still less, of course, a cynic; but he will be, without discredit to his well-known capacity for action, an observer. He will remember that the ways of the Lord are inscrutable, and

that this is a world in which everything happens; and eventualities, as the late Emperor of the French used to say, will not nd him intellectually unprepared.

Actually, the good American fell quite a bit short of James’s prediction, and he made far less of his traumatic fraternal con ict than might have been expected. If it did not make him skeptical (and how could he have been really, with all the material progress released after the war with which to a rm his optimism?), it did make him evasive and given to compromise on basic principles. As a result, we have the interruption of moral continuity symbolized in the failure of Reconstruction and the Hayes-Tilden Compromise, and now in the 1950s, at a time when our world leadership has become an indisputable and perplexing fact, we have been forced to return to problems, in the form of the current desegregation issue, which

should have been faced up to years ago. What is more, the event of World War I found the good American hardly less innocent than he had been fty-three years before—only now, instead of such critical and morally a rmative novels as *Huckleberry Finn, The Gilded Age, The Bostonians* (in which James depicts the decay of moral values among those who had been leaders in the struggle for abolition), *Moby-Dick* or *The Con dence-Man*, we had literature which came out of the individual writer's private need to express a national mood of glamorized social irresponsibility. Certainly the attitude of moral evasion expressed in the failure of Reconstruction and the materialism of the Gilded Age prepared for the mood of glamorized social irresponsibility voiced in the ction of the twenties, and it created a special problem between the American novelist and his audience.

Being committed to optimism, serious novels have always been troublesome to Americans precisely because of their involvement with our problem of identity. If they depict too much of reality, they frighten us by giving us a picture of society frozen at a point so far from our optimistic ideal (for in depiction there is a freezing as well as a discovery and release of possibility) that we feel compelled to deny it. Yet if they leave out too much, we cannot take them seriously for very long, even though we might buy them in hundreds

of thousands of copies. As readers we wait for de nition, and even now in this so-called age of conformity we wish to discover some transcendent meaning in at least some of the turbulence which whirls through our lives, and which during a period of highest prosperity makes it necessary for all the media of communication to set up an incessant "hard sell" incantation to reassure us that all is well, all meaningful, the very best state of a airs, that things confer happiness, beauty, and grace, and that fertility is a smiling face in a magazine ad.

Another way of putting it is that we are a people who, while desiring identity, have been reluctant to pay the cost of its achievement. We have been reluctant since we rst suspected that we are fated to live up to our sacred commitments or die, and the Civil War was the form of that fateful knowledge. Thus we approach serious novels with distrust until the moment comes when the passage of time makes it possible for us to ignore their

moral cutting edge. In the nineteenth century serious ction was fairly easily disposed of; it was given to children, especially to boys, and then only after being purged of those matters that were less likely to disturb the juvenile than his parents. *Huckleberry Finn* was banned from libraries, *Moby-Dick* went unread, and those who understood James were few. It was as though the older generation was saying,

"These are problems which you are likely to encounter when you come of age; we are too busy making progress to give them our attention," but when the younger generation grew up, so much had happened in the swift change, and they had been joined by so many new arrivals, that they forgot both the nature of the problem and its historical source. By the twenties the relationship between the serious novel and themselves as readers had undergone a remarkable change, and if they had lost little of the simplicity of James's earlier good American, they were now full of doubts about the possibility of the ideal, and had begun to resent it, much as they resented the necessity of participating in the war.

And so with the novel; where before it had a rmed the sacred assumptions, now, as in the Caporetto scene in *A Farewell to Arms*, it denied the very words in which the ideals were set down. The

nineteenth-century novelist had stood within society even as he criticized its behavior, and now the novelist thought of himself as alienated. Yet ironically, men like Fitzgerald and Hemingway were actually more celebrated than any American writer since Mark Twain. For all her shocks and traumas, America has been an extremely lucky country, and Time, as with the little boy in Dylan Thomas's poem, has let her be "golden in the mercy of his means,"

allowing her a generosity of mistakes, laxities and a childlike ability to forget her falls from grace, allowing her wealth, movement, a ruddy strength of people, national resources and a ceaseless stream of wonderful toys with which to excite her imagination and to keep her unaware of Time's ambiguousness.

Her luck was extended to her writers of the twenties. After the clangor and pain of the war and its booming echo in the expansion and hysterical

faddism of the twenties, the moral irresponsibility had become so chronic that one would have expected writers either to depict it critically or to become silent; instead they had the luck to give at least part of their attention to the so-called revolution of the word, which was o ered as a literary equivalent of that distraction from the realities of the moral situation provided by the material prosperity of the boom. Nor was it simply a matter of luck.

For all their pose of alienation, the writers of the twenties worked hard, and found images that were simple enough to project those feelings of impotence and moral irresponsibility that were typical of the times, and make them romantically attractive. The brave lonely man, broken by war and betrayed by politicians—who had lost faith in everything except the basic processes of existence and his own physical strength; who could no longer believe in the old American creed; who traveled to Pamplona and Paris; who drank too much, who made love compulsively and was romantically unhappy (but who yet had the money to indulge in his escape) —became the dominant image of the American. So gripping was this image that some critics look back today and actually confuse the image with the reality of the times.

By the twenties, in other words, the novel, which in the hands of our greatest writers had been a superb moral instrument, became

morally di dent, and much of its energy was turned upon itself in the form of technical experimentation. Which is not to deny that a writer like Hemingway has profound moral seriousness, or to imply that technique is ever void of moral implications; rather it is to say that here the personal despair which gave the technique its resonance became a means of helping other Americans to avoid those aspects of reality which they no longer had the will to face.

This is the tragedy implicit in Hemingway’s morality of craftsmanship: the attempt to make a highly personal morality the informing motive of an art form which by its very nature is extremely social and, despite its pose, deeply rooted in the assumption it denied. As I read Hemingway today I nd that he a rms the old American values by the eloquence of his denial, makes his moral point by stating explicitly that he does not believe in morality,

achieves his eloquence through denying eloquence, and is most moral when he denies the validity of a national morality which the nation has not bothered to live up to since the Civil War.

The confusion, both for Hemingway's imitators and his readers, lay in the understatement, and here the basic American assumptions exerted their power. Although it is seldom mentioned, Hemingway is as obsessed with the Civil War and its aftermath as any Southern writer, and this fact turns up constantly in his work. The children of the good Americans of the 1880s had forgotten the historical problems which made Hemingway's understatement fully meaningful, even though it was here exactly that the ideas which were said to be absent were most present and powerful. But many readers, unhappy with the compact we had made with history, took the novelist's point of view as authority to go on a binge of hooky-playing, as an assurance that there were no new lessons to learn—

and anyway the old ones were invalid. And this with the Depression only a few years away.

Yet so fascinating were the images of the twenties, and so deep and irrational the feelings which they made articulate, that thirty years later critics who readily admit the super ciality of most novels written during the thirties (for they tried to be responsible by avoiding complexity), and who reject most contemporary ction

even when written to their formulas, insist that we measure ourselves by the triumphs of the twenties. They tell us again and again of the Lost Generation novelists, and their names (with Faulkner's recently added) clang in our ears like gongs in evidence of our failure and doom. They, we are told, did that which we cannot hope to do, and if this fails to discourage us, the nineteenth-century novel of manners is held before us as nal evidence of our futility and the novel's point of highest glory and swift decline.

Not that we disagree absolutely with any of this, but we must reply to these charges. Thank God that we can't do what the Lost Generation novelists did, because as good as it was, it was not good enough or broad enough to speak for today. And thank God again that the nineteenth-century European

novel of manners is dead, for it has little value in dealing with our world of chaos and catastrophe. We have lived a di erent life and have seen it with di erent eyes. Nor are we innocent of the world's new complexity or given to false pieties, easy hopes or facile rejections; nor are we unaware of the weakness implicit in our tremendous strength, or of the possibilities of strength in our apparent weaknesses, for the iron-weight of tragic awareness has descended upon us. Ours is a task which, whether recognized or not, was de ned for us to a large extent by that which the novels of the twenties failed to confront, and implicit in their triumphs and follies are our complexity and our travail.

Indeed, so much has been written about the triumphs of the twenties that we either forget its failures or forgive them—which would be ne if the critics would only leave it at that. But the contemporary novelist cannot a ord to forget the failures, even if he makes no accusations, and the intentions of such a novelist as Saul Bellow can be properly understood only in light of this failure. After two well-written, neatly constructed novels which paid their respects to the standards of the twenties, Bellow's major work to date is *The Adventures of Augie March*, which at rst glance looks like the work of a completely di erent man. It is characterized by a big conception of human possibility and a quality of wonder arising out of the mysteriousness of a reality which keeps its secret despite

the documentation of the social scientists, and it is informed by a knowledge of chaos which would have left the novelists of the twenties discouraged. Certainly it confronts large areas of American reality which simply didn't get into the novels of the twenties.

I would go further here and say that neither the American ction of the twenties nor that of the fties can be understood outside the perspective provided by the nineteenth century. Edmund Wilson seems to suggest this by his current reexamination of the Civil War and post-Reconstruction periods, and certainly the younger writers who came through the Depression and who shared the social and political preoccupations of the thirties feel this, even though they have little bothered to write about it. Yet it is one of the goals of the current serious novel to create precisely this moral perspective. Here perhaps is one of our most serious failures, for not

only has the drift of our internal social a airs brought this period and its unsolved moral problems back into the national consciousness, but world events have revealed their broad relevance to areas far beyond our national borders. In other words, the events which wracked the United States during the Civil War period and again during the twenties were the archetype of events which are now sweeping all societies, and our failure to confront them when they arose (for perhaps they could not have been *solved)* has proved not only an impediment to our leadership among the nations but a hindrance to our achievement of national identity.

Perhaps the attitude of those novelists who matured during the forties has been too quietly aloof, our absorption in craft problems too concentrated, and our dependence upon the perceptiveness of critics too trusting. Perhaps we who disdain the easy pose are far more alienated than the writers of the Lost Generation, for we have assumed an understanding on the part of both reader and critic which is at best rare, and we fail to say much that is explicit about our intentions or points of view.

By contrast the writers of the twenties did a brilliant job publicizing their own e orts. During the time when *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* were being written, both were eagerly discussed in several languages and several countries. Because Joyce (no member

of the Lost Generation but the most “di cult” novelist of the period) was not only writing his books; he was, with the help of magazine editors, friends and critics, just as busily establishing the convention by which he wished his novels read. Whatever his success in absenting himself from his novels as omniscient author—

a technical problem already solved by Conrad and James—in his correspondence he did anything but pare his nails; he was far too busy telling those who tell readers how to read just what the godlike author was about. Clearly it is no accident that more people have read about how his books should be read than have read them. And for all of the legend of Hemingway’s nonintellectuality, and the aesthetic ideas spun in metaphors from sports, he has nevertheless written so much and so signi cantly about writing that two younger writers are busy making a volume of his

observations. One needs only mention the examples of Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound and Henry James before them.

Looked at coldly, the notion of a Lost Generation was a literary conceit of such major proportions that today it seems like a swindle.

The alienation of these writers had something of the character of putting on a mask in Macy's window at high noon and pretending that no one knows who you are. They had not only the comfort of being in the well-advertised advance guard; they were widely read and their characters' way of life was imitated to the extent that several generations of young people stylized their speech and attitudes to the pattern of Fitzgerald's and Flemingway's ction.

"Papa" Hemingway (who *is* the father of many writers who today sneer at him) was so alienated that a song, "Pul-eeze, Mr.

Hemingway," could nd popularity. With *Esquire* carrying their work to readers in most of the barbershops throughout the country, these writers were lost in a crowd of admirers, of whom I was one.

For all the personal despair which informed it and the hard work which brought it into being, the emphasis on technique gave something of a crossword-puzzle-fad aspect to the literature of the twenties, and often the question of the Sphinx was lost in the conundrums. Without doubt major questions went unanswered. Yet, happily, its concentration upon the problems of craft made it

impossible for us to ignore the fact that literature, to the extent that it is art, is arti cial. Each of us must learn to read and understand the devices through which ction achieves its illusion of reality.

Thanks to their popularizers and the generations of critics who followed, we know how to read their books extremely well, especially in terms of those matters which preoccupied them, and the level of craft consciousness is so high in the United States that today by keeping to formula and the neat theme (neat because smoothed down and polished since Flaubert's time) the writer may turn out readable, smoothly fashioned novels which evoke a response much like that we extend those miniaturists who work in ivory.

The phrases are neatly done, there is a great economy of means (because there is so little of substance), tightness of structure, great texture and facile sensibility.

Anyone who has had a course in modern literature or who has read a little criticism has the satisfaction of knowing just how each image and metaphor operates, who the hero's literary ancestors were, just how Joyce, James, Freud, Marx, Sartre, Camus, Unamuno, Kierkegaard, Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Lionel Trilling came into it. There is, in this writing, no excess of emotion (if any at all) or shrillness of tone, no vulgarity or uncertainties of taste; nor are there any patterns of action that would violate the assumptions concerning life or art that are held by the most timid middle-class reader. The writer may, if he likes, play the turns of the whole corpus of genteel nineteenth-and twentieth-century ction, especially the European, and never exhaust himself in the process of translating these well-polished themes and situations into American backgrounds, utilizing along the way all the latest verbal techniques approved by the critics.

Despite their skill, however, these novels are not widely read, and the reader who looks here for some acknowledgment of the turbulence he feels around him would be better satis ed by a set of comic books. He thus turns to "fact" books for "scienti c"

consolation because the orientation in reality which the novel should a ord him is not forthcoming, and the critics, appalled by the stillborn children which they have called forth, look backward

to those highly dubious Edens of the nineteenth century and of the Lost Generation, and pronounce the novel dead. If so, perhaps they have helped to dig its grave.

If the nineteenth-century way with troublesome novels was to turn them over to children, we in our time, being more sophisticated and literate, turn them over to critics, who proceed to reduce the annoying elements to a minimum. Even more deplorable is the fact that once the critics have spoken, the story is likely to appear in subsequent editions with the troublesome, di cult material edited out, as happened to one of the most

sublime stories in the language, really an extremely foreshortened novel—Faulkner's "The Bear."

Perhaps the test of a work's becoming a classic in the United States depends upon the extent to which it can withstand this process of conscious reduction. Perhaps what I am saying is that since the novel is a moral instrument possessing for us an integrative function, our typical American reaction to it is to evade as much of its moral truth as possible, perhaps out of an e ort to postpone completing that identity which we are compelled nonetheless to seek. But as to the critics' role in this process, I am struck that while their reductions are made on aesthetic grounds, it turns out that what they consider expendable is usually the heart of the ction.

Here, out of fairness, I must include novelists like James and Hemingway, who, by way of de ning their own aesthetic positions, have contributed to some of the current confusion.

Let us take Henry James on Hawthorne, Hemingway on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and Malcolm Cowley on Faulkner's

"The Bear"—these three because each has been in uential in shaping our ideas of American ction and how it should be read, and because at least two have been o ered as guides for the younger novelists who have come upon the scene since the thirties.

Each of the texts constitutes a de nition of American ction; each has been helpful in giving us orientation; and today all three have become mischievous in adding to the current confusion over the role, character and condition of the contemporary novel. Indeed, it is as though a set of familiar, useful touchstones had become

in ated and transformed into a set of wandering rocks which threaten to crush us.

Each of the texts I shall quote is so familiar that there would be no need to cite them except for the fact that each has achieved its importance by virtue of its being a statement by reduction of either a perceptive critical observation or the meaning of an important novel. Hence in order to

determine where we are and how we arrived at some of our current convictions concerning the novel, it is useful to take a look at exactly what was discarded from the originals.

Almost alone Mr. Trilling has been responsible for making a single statement of Henry James more prominent in our thinking than all the complex aesthetic ideas spelled out in the prefaces and essays. In developing his theory of the novel of manners, he paraphrases James's catalogue of those items of civilization which were missing from Hawthorne's America, itself an extension of a list which Hawthorne had himself made in the preface to his novel *Transformation (The Marble Faun):*

No author, without a trial, can conceive of the di culty of writing a romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with my dear native land.

This is Mr. Hawthorne, and while admiring what he made of his position one must observe that in this world one nds that which one has the eyes to see. Certainly there was gloomy wrong enough both in the crime against the Indians and in the Peculiar Institution which was shortly to throw the country into con ict, there was enough mystery in Abraham Lincoln's emergence, then in process, still to excite us with wonder, and in that prosperity and "broad and simple daylight" enough evil was brewing to confound us even today. But let us see what James made of this quote, for it is upon James that Mr. Trilling bases much of his argument: The perusal of Hawthorne's American NoteBooks operates as a practical commentary upon this somewhat ominous text. It does so at least to my own

mind; it would be too much perhaps to say that the e ect would be the same for the usual English reader. An American reads between the lines—he completes the suggestions—he constructs a picture. I think I am not guilty of any gross injustice in saying that the picture he constructs from Hawthorne's American diaries, though by no means without charms of its own, is not, on the whole, an interesting one. It is characterized by an extraordinary blankness—a curious paleness of colour and paucity of detail.

Hawthorne, as I have said, has a large and healthy appetite for detail, and one is therefore the more struck with the lightness of the diet to which his observation was condemned. For myself, as I turn the pages of his journals, I seem to see the image of the crude and simple society in which he lived. I use these epithets, of course, not invidiously, but descriptively; if one desires to enter as closely as possible into Hawthorne's situation, one must endeavour to reproduce his circumstances. We are struck with the large number of elements that were absent from them, and the coldness, the thinness, the blankness, to repeat my epithet, present themselves so vividly that our foremost feeling is that of compassion for a romancer looking for subjects in such a eld. It takes so many things, as Hawthorne must have felt later in life, when he made the acquaintance of the denser, richer, warmer European spectacle—it takes such an accumulation of history and custom, such a complexity of manners and types, to form a fund of suggestion for a novelist. If Hawthorne had been a young Englishman, or a young Frenchman of the same degree of genius, the same cast of mind, the same habits, his consciousness of the world around him would have been a very di erent a air; however obscure, however reserved, his own personal life, his sense of the life of his fellow-mortals would have been almost in nitely more various. The negative side of the spectacle on which Hawthorne looked out, in his contemplative saunterings and reveries, might, indeed [And it is here that Mr. Trilling's much repeated paraphrase begins], with a little ingenuity, be made almost ludicrous; one might enumerate the items of high civilization, as it exists in other countries, which are absent from the texture of American life, until it should become a wonder to know what was left. No State, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a speci c national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, nor castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages, nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great

Universities nor public schools—no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class—no Epsom nor Ascot! Some such list as that might be drawn up of the absent things in American life—especially in the American life of forty years ago, the e ect of which, upon an English or a French

imagination, would probably as a general thing be appalling. The natural remark, in the almost lurid light of such an indictment, would be that if these things are left out, everything is left out.

[And it is here that Mr. Trilling leaves us.] The American knows that a good deal remains; what it is that remains—that is his secret, his joke, as one may say. It would be cruel, in this terrible denudation, to deny him the consolation of his natural gift, that "American humour" of which of late years we have heard so much.

"That is," says Mr. Trilling, "no su ciency of means for the display of a variety of manners, no opportunity for the novelist to do his job of searching out reality, not enough complication of appearance to make the job interesting." Mr. Trilling states in the same essay that while we have had great novels in America, they

"diverge from [the novel's] classic intention … the investigation of the problem of reality beginning in the social eld."

All this is admittedly a damaging list of reasons why American novelists cannot write French or English novels of manners. But when I read the much quoted passage in context (one of Mr.

Trilling's disciples has deduced from it that personality exists in the United States only in New England and in the South), it struck me as amusing that Mr. Trilling missed the point that these lacks were seen as appalling for the French or English imagination—for it seems obvious that in that time neither Frenchmen nor Englishmen were going to try to write American novels (though things are di erent today), that James was addressing his remarks to Europeans, and that all the energy that has been wasted in bemoaning the fact that American society is not English or French society could have stopped right there.

James's remarks on Hawthorne are justi ed to the extent that the perspective he was creating helped him to establish his own point of departure; it is to the insistence that his observations be binding

upon other writers that I object. Nor can I overlook the fact that James was basing his remarks on the thinness of Hawthorne's notebooks—which, compared with James's, were indeed thin. Yet just when, one might ask without too much irreverence, did a writer's quality—James's proli c notebooks notwithstanding—

depend upon the kind of notebooks he kept? Did anyone ever see Shakespeare's notebooks? And would anyone who read Dostoevsky's *A Writer's Diary* without an acquaintance with the novels suspect that it was the journal of one of the greatest novelists of all time?

For me the most surprising aspect of Mr. Trilling's paraphrase is that he says nothing at all about what James calls the "American joke"—a matter which, as a novelist, intrigues me no end. I take it that James's reference to American humor was nothing more than condescension, and that he did not mean it in the sense that it was used by Miss Constance Rourke, who saw American humor as having the function of de ning and consolidating the diverse elements—racial, cultural and otherwise—which go into the American character, a business to which James made a profound contribution, even when irritated by what he considered the thinness of American experience. One wonders what the state of novel criticism would be today if Mr. Trilling had turned his critical talent to an examination of the American joke. Perhaps *this* has been the objective of the American novel all along, even the Jamesian novel, and perhaps this is its road to health even today.

But now another touchstone: "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn.*… it's the best book we've had. All American writing comes from that." So wrote Ernest Hemingway in *Green Hills of Africa* in a much-quoted statement. It is signi cant that here again we have a statement by reduction which, although it helped Hemingway to create his own position, has helped us to ignore what seems to me to be the very heart of *Huckleberry Finn*. He tells us in the same context that we should stop reading at the point where Jim is stolen from Huck and Tom Sawyer because from that point on it is cheating. Here we have something di erent from the rst example, and perhaps, in light of Hemingway's great in uence upon American ction, more

important. In order to de ne his own position (or perhaps to justify it, since the statement comes some ten years after he caught the public's imagination), Hemingway found it necessary to reduce the meaning of *Huckleberry Finn* to the proportions of his own philosophical position. Far more meaningful to him than the moral vision and sense of language which summoned them into being were the techniques through which Twain gave it expression. So too with the critics who usually quote Hemingway's remarks, with the most important phrase in his statement omitted. For when he goes on to advise us that we should stop reading *Huckleberry Finn* at the point where Jim is stolen from Huck and Tom Sawyer, he reveals either a blindness to the moral point of the novel or his own inability to believe in the moral necessity which makes Huck know that he must at least make the attempt to get Jim free—to "steal"

him free is the term by which Twain reveals Huck's full awareness of the ambiguousness of his position, and through which he roots the problem in American social reality and draws upon the contradiction between democratic idealism and the existence of slavery. Nevertheless, it is exactly this part of the action which represents the formal externalization of Huck-Twain's moral position, and if one may speak of ritual here, it is in this part of the action that the fundamental American commitment, the myth, is made manifest. Without this attempt *Huckleberry Finn* becomes the simple boy's book that many would rather it be, a fantasy born of pure delight and not really serious at all.

Yet Hemingway is a serious author, and in this statement he not only tells us more about himself than about Twain or American ction, but he expresses the basic di erence in points of view between nineteenth-and twentieth-century writers. Thus not only did *Huckleberry Finn* lose some of its meaning; many of those whom it might have helped to some sense of the moral and historical continuity of American life were advised, in e ect, that such continuity was nonexistent. But it is useless to quarrel with history, and as one who is committed to the craft I can even admit that Hemingway's art justi es what he made of Twain's. But what are we

to say of the critics who circulate his statement as though it were the word of God? What of their responsibility to the reader?

One can easily agree with Hemingway about the importance of *Huckleberry Finn* in the continuity of the American novel while rejecting his dismissal of its ethical intention, for we have in William Faulkner a twentieth-century writer who not only continues in his own way the technical direction outlined by Mark Twain, but also, despite Lionel Trilling's dismissal of him as "being limited to a provincial scene," continues the moral commitment which was at the heart of Twain's ction.

Just as experimental and technically "di cult" as Hemingway, and perhaps as Joyce, Faulkner missed the broad publicity accorded their experimentation, not only because his more important works were published somewhat later, but because there is no doubt that he is involved both as a Southerner and as an artist with those issues which most white Americans have evaded since the Civil War. It was not until about 1946 that Faulkner began to win the attention of Americans generally, and a great aid in this was the Viking Portable, edited by Malcolm Cowley. By this time several of the most important novels were out of print, and one cannot overstress the service rendered by Cowley and the publisher in issuing their collection with Cowley's introduction and commentary. Through it many Americans not only made their rst contact with a great writer, but were introduced to a superb imaginative account of what so much of the con ict in American life is all about. Thus my reason for mentioning Cowley's reduction of the meaning of Faulkner's

"The Bear" is not to detract from the importance of the Portable, but to illustrate further the reduction of the moral intention of American prose ction by way of making it easier for the reader.

"The Bear" [writes Mr. Cowley] is the longest of Faulkner's stories and in many ways the best. It is divided into ve parts. If you want to read simply a hunting story, and one of the greatest in the language, you should con ne yourself to the rst three parts and the last, which are written in Faulkner's simplest style.

The long fourth part is harder to read and deals with more complicated matters.

In it Faulkner carries to an extreme his e ort toward putting the whole world

into one sentence, between one capital letter and one period.… In all this section of “The Bear” the reader may have di culty in tting the subjects to the predicates and in disentangling the subordinate clauses; and yet, if he perseveres, he will discover one of Faulkner’s most impressive themes: the belief in Isaac McCaslin’s heart that the land itself had been cursed by slavery, and that the only way for him to escape the curse was to relinquish the land.

But not only does this fourth section (which takes up thirty-four of the 136 pages) contain this theme; it is in fact the dislocated beginning of the story and the time-present in which the bear hunt is evoked out of the memory of the hero, who at the age of twenty-one confronts his cousin with his decision to give up the land.

Although it has recently been included in a volume of hunting stories with the fourth section missing, “The Bear” is not about a bear hunt at all, but about a young American’s hunt for moral identity. Signi cantly, it is the centerpiece of a volume which takes its title from the Negro spiritual “Go Down, Moses,” and its main concern is with the problem of American freedom as faced by a speci c white Southerner in relation to his individual heritage.

Here, in *Go Down, Moses,* Faulkner comes most passionately to grips with the moral implications of slavery, the American land, progress and materialism, tradition and moral identity—all major themes of the American novel. It is in the fourth section—not really di cult once it is grasped that it is a remembered dialogue with the “he saids” left out—where Isaac and his cousin McCaslin argue out the issues between them (McCaslin basing his arguments on tradition and history and Isaac on a form of Christian humanism) that Faulkner makes his most extended e ort to de ne the speci c form of the American Negro’s humanity and to get at the human values which were lost by both North and South during the Civil War. Even more important, it is here that Isaac McCaslin demonstrates one way in which the individual American can assert his freedom from the bonds of history, tradition and things, and thus achieve moral identity. Whether we accept Isaac McCaslin’s solution or not, the problem is nevertheless basic to democratic man, as it was to Ahab and to Huck Finn.

Nor do I wish to oversimplify Mr. Cowley's problem; if serious ction is to be made available to those to whom it is addressed—

those who, as Ike McCaslin puts it, "have nothing else to read with but the heart"—the critic must interpret for them, and in the process of making literature available to all the levels of a democratic society, some loss of quality, some blunting of impact, seems inevitable. Nevertheless the critic has some responsibility in seeing that the reader does not evade the crucial part of a ction simply because of its di culty. Sometimes the di culty is the mark of the writer's deepest commitment to life and to his art. To water down his work is not only to mock the agony and the joy which go into his creation, but to rob the reader of that transcendence which, despite his tendency to evade the tragic aspects of reality, he seeks in literature. The intent of criticism is frustrated, the ction reduced to mere entertainment, and the reader is encouraged to evade self-scrutiny. In the leveling process to which all things are subjected in a democracy, one must depend always upon the *individual's* ability to rise out of the mass and achieve the possibility implicit in the society. One must depend upon his ability, whoever he is and from whatever class and racial group, to attain the nest perception of human value, to become as consciously aware of life, say, as any of Henry James's "super-subtle fry." Certainly the novelist must make some such assumption if he is to allow himself range in which to work toward the nest possibilities of his talent and his form without a frustrating sense of alienation.

Which tells us something of why the novelists keep writing despite the current attempts to legislate the novel a quiet death. It also gives us a hint about why a number of younger novelists are not at all hindered by the attempt to reduce the novel to only one of its possible forms; yes, and why the picaresque, many-leveled novel, swarming with characters, and with varied types and levels of experience, has appeared among us. Though we love the classics, some of us have little interest in what Mr. Trilling calls the "novel of manners," and I don't believe that a society hot in the process of de ning itself can for long nd its image in so limited a form. Surely

the novel is more than he would have it be, and if it isn't, then we must make it so.

One of the comic aspects of the current controversy over what a novel should be is the implicit assumption, held by Cooper, James and Hawthorne, as well as by several contemporary critics, that society was created mainly so that novelists could write about it. It is felt that society should be of such shape that the novelist can settle it neatly into prefabricated molds with the least spilling of rude life over the sides. This notion started when the forest was still being cleared, and it is understandable that a certain type of writer would have liked to deal with ne cabinetry instead of crude logs.

Still, minds that were philosophically and politically most advanced and sophisticated conceived this society, but even they had nonetheless to deal with raw and rapidly moving materials. So in the beginning did the American novel, and so today. We are not so crude now as during James's time, but we have even less stability and there is no longer a stable England to which to withdraw for perspective. World War I, the Depression, World War II and Korea, the Cold War, the threat of the atom, our discovery of the reality of treason, and now Egypt and Hungary make us aware that reality, which during Dickens's time seemed fairly stable, has broken loose from its old historical base, and the Age of Anxiety is truly more than a poetic conceit. Closed societies are now the imsiest of illusions, for all the outsiders are demanding in.

In fact there is no stability anywhere, there will not be for many years to come, and progress now insistently asserts its tragic side; the evil now stares out of bright sunlight. New groups will ceaselessly emerge, class lines will continue to waver, break and reform; great wealth there will be, and a broader distribution of that wealth, and a broader distribution of ideas along with it. But the problem of what to do with the increased leisure which wealth makes possible will continue to plague us, as will the problem of deciding just what constitutes a truly human way of life. The fundamental problems of the American situation will repeat themselves again and again, and will be faced more or less by peoples throughout the world: where shall we draw the line upon

our own freedom in a world in which culture, tradition and even history have been shaken up? At how fast a pace should we move toward social

ideals? What is worth having and what worth holding? Where and in what pattern of conduct does true value lie at a given moment? These questions will continue to press upon us even if the dream of world peace is achieved, for they are questions built into the core of modern experience.

For the novelist the existence of these questions creates a basic problem of rhetoric. How does one in the novel (the novel which is a work of art and not a disguised piece of sociology) persuade the American reader to identify that which is basic in man, beyond all di erences of class, race, wealth or formal education? How does one not only make the illiterate and inarticulate eloquent enough so that the educated and more favorably situated will recognize wisdom and honor and charity, heroism and capacity for love when found in humble speech and dress? Conversely, how does one persuade readers with the least knowledge of literature to recognize the broader values implicit in their lives? How, in a word, do we a rm that which *is* stable in human life, beyond and despite all processes of social change? How give the reader that which we do have in abundance, all the countless untold and wonderful variations on the themes of identity, freedom and necessity, love and death, and with all the mystery of personality undergoing its endless metamorphosis?

Here are questions which cannot be answered by criticism; they call for the novel, many novels, and as long as there are writers willing to accept the challenge of reducing the reality in which they exist to living form, there will be readers interested in their answers, and we need have no fear that the novel is moribund.

From *The Living Novel*, Macmillan Inc., 1957.

“A Very Stern Discipline”

Interviewers: Do you think that one of the faults of the Negro writer is that he is unable to come to terms with the human condition, particularly that of the Negro in America?

Ellison: Here I don’t like to speak generally. The conception of the human condition varies for every writer just as it does for every individual. Each must live within the isolation of his own senses, dreams and memories;

each must die his own death. For the writer the problem is to project his own conception eloquently and artistically. Like all good artists, he stakes his talent against the world. But if a Negro writer is going to listen to sociologists—as too many of us do—who tell us that Negro life is thus and so in keeping with certain sociological theories, he is in trouble because he will have abandoned his task before he begins. If he accepts the clichés to the e ect that the Negro family is usually a broken family, that it is matriarchal in form and that the mother dominates and castrates the males, if he believes that Negro males are having all of these alleged troubles with their sexuality, or that Harlem is a "Negro ghetto"—which means, to paraphrase one of our writers, "piss in the halls and blood on the stairs"—he'll never see the people of whom he wishes to write. He'll never learn to use his own eyes and heart, and he'll never master the art of ction.

I don't deny that these sociological formulas are drawn from life, but I do deny that they de ne the complexity of Harlem. They only abstract it and reduce it to proportions which the sociologists can manage. I simply don't recognize Harlem in them, and I certainly don't recognize the people of Harlem whom I know. Which is not to deny the ruggedness of life there, nor the hardship, the poverty, the sordidness, the lth. But there is something else in Harlem, something subjective, willful and complexly and compellingly

human. It is that "something else" that challenges the sociologists who ignore it, and the society which would deny its existence. It is that "something else" which makes for our strength, endurance and promise. This is the proper subject for the Negro American writer.

Hell, he doesn't have to spend all the tedious time required to write novels simply to repeat what sociologists and certain white intellectuals are broadcasting like a zoo full of parrots— *and* getting much more money for it than most Negro writers will ever see. If he does this, he'll not only go begging, but worse, he'll lie to his people, discourage their interest in literature and emasculate his own talent.

This is tricky terrain, because today sociologists are up to their necks in politics and have access to millions of governmental dollars, which, I'm afraid, have been secured at the cost of propagating an image of the Negro

condition that is apt to destroy our human conception of ourselves just at the moment when we are becoming politically free. Those who buy this image are surely in trouble, no matter what money it brings.

One of the saddest sights currently to be seen is that provided by one of our most “angry” Negro writers, who has allowed himself to be enslaved by his acceptance of negative sociological data. He rants and raves against society, but he’s actually one of the safest Negroes on the scene. Because he challenges nothing, he can only shout “

’taint” to some abstract white “ ’tis,” countering lies with lies. The human condition? He thinks that white folks have ruled Negroes out of it.

A few years ago there was a drunk who collected newspapers from the shops along Broadway between 145th and 153rd streets.

He was a Negro who had fought the wine for a long time, and who when drunk was capable of a metaphysical de ance. His favorite pastime was to take a stand near a stoplight and accost white people who stopped for the tra c signal with shouts of “Why don’t you go back downtown! I want all you white motherfuckers—mens *and* womens—to go on back downtown!” Our hate-mongering fellow writer reminds me very much of this man, for he is about as

e ective and no less obscene. Yes, we do have a terrible time in dealing with the human condition.

One critic has said that the Jewish writer went through a similar period. I think he was trying to say that the Negro writer would very soon get over this and become the major strength in American literature.

I hope he’s right, but I wouldn’t want to make a prediction. I think, however, that the parallel is much too facile. Jewish writers are more familiar with literature as a medium of expression. Their history provides for a close identi cation with writers who were, and are, Jewish even when they wrote or write in languages other than Yiddish or Hebrew—and this even when that identi cation rests simply on a shared religious tradition and

hardly on any other cultural ground whatsoever. It reminds me of our attempts to claim Pushkin and Dumas as Negroes.

By contrast, neither Negro American expression nor religion has been primarily literary. We are by no means, as is said of the Jews,

“people of the Book.” Not that I see this as a matter for regret, for we have a wider freedom of selection. We took much from the ancient Hebrews and we do share, through Christianity, the values embodied in the literature of much of the world. But our expression has been oral as against “literary.” When it comes to the question of identifying those writers who have shaped American literature—the framers of the Declaration, the Constitution and Lincoln excepted—

we tend to project racial categories into the areas of artistic technique, form and insight, areas where race has no proper place.

We seem to forget that one can identify with what a writer has written, with its form, manner and techniques, while rejecting the writer’s beliefs, prejudices, philosophy and values.

Jewish American writers have, on the other hand, identi ed with Eliot, Pound, Hemingway and Joyce *as writers*, while questioning and even rejecting their various attitudes toward Jews, religion, politics and many other matters. They have taken possession of that which they could use from such writers and converted it to express

their own personal and group sense of reality; they have used it to express their own de nitions of the American experience. But we Negro writers seem seldom to have grasped this process of acculturation. Too often we’ve been in such haste to express our anger and our pain as to allow the single tree of race to obscure our view of the magic forest of art.

If Negro writers ever become the mainstay of American literature, it will be because they have learned their craft and used the intensity, emotional and political, of their group experience to express a greater area of American experience than writers of other groups. What the Jewish American writer had to learn before he could nd his place was the Americanness of his

experience. He had to see himself as American and project his Jewish experience as an experience unfolding within this pluralistic society. When this was done, it was possible to project this variant of the American experience as a metaphor for the whole.

However, I don’t believe that any one group can speak for the whole experience—and it isn’t, perhaps, even desirable. They can only reduce it to metaphor, and no one has yet forged a metaphor rich enough to reduce American diversity to form. Certainly the current group of Jewish writers, among whom there are several I admire, do not speak adequately for me or for Negroes generally.

But during the thirties Jewish writing, although more skillful, was as provincial as most Negro American writing is today. That’s the way it was, and we don’t solve problems of history by running away from them. What I mean by provincial is an inability to see beyond the con nes and constrictions placed upon Jewish life by its religious and cultural di erences with the larger society, by its being basically the experience of an immigrant people who were, by and large, far less cultured than their more representative members.

It took long years of living in this country, long years of being a unique part of American society and discovering that they were not *forced* to live on the Lower East Side, of discovering that there *was* a place for the Jews in this society which did not depend upon their losing their group identity. They discovered that they possessed something precious to bring to the broader American culture, on the

lowest as well as on the highest levels of human activity, and that it would have a creative impact far beyond the Jewish community.

Many had not only to learn the language, but, more wonderful, had to discover that the Jewish American idiom would lend a whole new dimension to the American language.

How do the situations of the Negro and Jewish writers di er?

I think that Negro Americans as *writers* run into certain problems which the Jews don't have. One is that our lives since slavery have been described mainly in terms of our political, economic and social conditions as measured by outside norms, seldom in terms of our *own* sense of life or our *own* unique American experience. Nobody bothered to ask Negroes how they felt about their own lives.

Southern whites used to tell the joke about the white employer who said to a Negro worker, "You're a good hand and I appreciate you.

You make my business go much better. But although you work well every day, I can never get you to work on Saturday night, even if I o er to pay you overtime. Why is this?" Of course, you know the answer: "If you could just be a Negro one Saturday night, you'd never want to be a white man again." This is a rather facile joke, and a white Southern joke on Negroes; nevertheless, it does indicate an awareness that there is an internality to Negro American life, that it possesses its own attractions and its own mystery.

Now, the pathetic element in the history of Negro American writing is that it started out by re ecting the styles popular at the time, styles uninterested in the human complexity of Negroes. These were the styles of dialect humor transfused into literature from the *white* stereotype of the Negro minstrel tradition. This was Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Waddell Chestnutt. It helped them get published, but it got in the way of their subject matter and their goal of depicting Negro personality. Let's face it, those were times when white publishers and the white reading public wished to encounter only certain types of Negroes in poetry and ction.

Even so, it was not a Negro writer who created the most memorable character in this tradition, but Mark Twain, whose

"Nigger Jim" is, I think, one of the important characters in our literature. Nevertheless, Jim is awed by his relationship to the minstrel tradition. Twain's portrait of Jim re ected the popular culture of the 1880s, just as the

Negro characters you get in much of current ction are in uenced by the stereotypes presented by the movies and by sociology, those even more powerful media of popular culture.

The Negro writers who appeared during the 1920s wished to protest discrimination; some wished to show o their high regard for respectability; they wished to express their new awareness of their African background; and as Americans trying to win a place as writers, they were drawn to the going style of literary decadence represented by Carl Van Vechten's work. This was an extremely ironic development for a group whose written literature was still in its infancy—as incongruous as the notion of a decadent baby. Even more ironic, this was a time when Eliot, Pound, Hemingway and Stein were really tearing American literature apart and reshaping its values and its styles in the "revolution of the word." We always picked the moribund style. We took to dialect at a time when *Benito Cereño, Moby-Dick* and *Leaves of Grass* were at hand to point a more viable direction for a people whose demands were revolutionary, and whose humanity had been badly distorted by the accepted styles.

For more understandable reasons, during the 1930s we were drawn to the theories of proletarian literature. During the twenties we had wanted to be fashionable, and this ensured, even more e ectively than the approaching Depression, the failure of the "New Negro" movement. We fell into that old trap by which the segregated segregate themselves by trying to turn whatever the whites said against us into its opposite. If they said Negroes love fried chicken (and why shouldn't we?), we replied, "We *hate* fried chicken." If they said Negroes have no normal family life, we replied, "We have a staider, more re ned, more puritanical family life than you." If they said that Negroes love pork chops, we replied,

"We despise them!" With few exceptions, our energies as writers have too often been focused upon outside de nitions of reality, and we have used literature for racial polemics rather than as an agency through which we might de ne experience as we ourselves have seen and felt it. These are negative charges, I know, but they seem true to me.

Indeed, it is very di cult, even today, for younger Negro writers to overcome these negative tendencies. Far too often they have been taught to think in

Jim Crow terms: “I can do thus and so—not because human beings express themselves in these ways, but because such and such a *Negro* dared to do so.” But if no other Negro has involved himself in the activity in question, then we tend to draw back and doubt that we might do well even as pioneers.

Hence the younger writer tries to write on the models of other Negro writers rather than on the best writers regardless of race, class or what have you, completely ignoring the fact that all other writers try to pattern themselves on the achievements of the greatest writers, regardless of who the hell they were.

This is how the Jim Crow experience has gotten into our attitudes and set us back. We have been exiled in our own land, and as for our e orts at writing, we have been little better than silent because we have not been cunning. I nd this astounding, because I feel that Negro American folklore is powerful, wonderful and universal. It became so by expressing a people who were assertive, eclectic and irreverent before all the oral and written literature that came within its grasp. It took what it needed to express its sense of life and rejected what it couldn’t use.

But what we have achieved in folklore has seldom been achieved in the novel, the short story or poetry. In folklore we tell what Negro experience really is. We back away from the chaos of experience and from ourselves, and we depict the humor as well as the horror of our living. We project Negro life in a metaphysical perspective, and we have seen it with a complexity of vision that seldom gets into our writing. One reason for this lies in the poor teaching common to our schools and colleges, but the main failure

lies, I think, in our simpleminded attempt to reduce ction to a mere protest.

I notice that you mentioned, some time ago, that you learned a lot of skill under Richard Wright. Do you nd that he gauged his craft to the great writers of the world?

He certainly tried to do so. He was constantly reading the great masters, just as he read the philosophers, the political theorists, the social and literary

critics. He did not limit himself in the manner that many Negro writers currently limit themselves. He also encouraged other writers, who usually rebu ed him, to become conscious craftsmen, to plunge into the world of conscious literature and take their chances unafraid. He felt this to be one of the few areas in which Negroes could be as free and as equal as their minds and talents would allow. Like a good Negro athlete, he believed in his ability to compete. In 1940 he was well aware that *Native Son* was being published at a time when *The Grapes of Wrath* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* would be his main competition. Nevertheless, he looked toward publication day nervously but eagerly. He wished to be among the most advanced artists and was willing to run the risk required.

Earlier you referred to the minstrel as a stereotype. Is it possible to treat such stereotypes as Sambo, or even Stepin Fetchit, as archetypes or motives instead of using them in the usual format?

Well, in ction stereotypes partake of archetypes, and to the extent that stereotypes point to something basically human, they overlap.

Yes, in literary form stereotypes function, as do other forms of characterization, as motives. But the point is that they act as *imposed* motives which treat reality and character arbitrarily. Thus, to redeem them as you suggest, the writer is challenged to reveal the archetypical truth hidden within the stereotype. Here archetypes are embodiments of abiding patterns of human existence which underlie

racial, cultural and religious di erences. In their basic humanity, they are timeless and raceless, while stereotypes are malicious reductions of human complexity which seize upon such characteristics as color, the shape of a nose, an accent or hair texture, and convert them into emblems which render it unnecessary for the prejudiced individual to confront the humanity of those upon whom the stereotype has been imposed.

In answer to your question as to whether it is possible to use such stereotypes as Sambo and Stepin Fetchit, I'd say that it depends upon the writer's vision. If I used such stereotypes in ction, I'd have to reveal their archetypical aspects because my own awareness *of*, and identi cation *with*, the human complexity which they deny would compel me to transform

them into something more recognizably human. To do less would be to reveal a brutalization of my own sense of human personality.

On the other hand, let's take Faulkner. When Lucas Beauchamp rst appears in Faulkner's work, he appears as a stereotype, but as he was developed throughout the successive novels, he became one of Faulkner's highest representatives of human quality. Or again, when Ned in the last book, *The Reivers*, is seen super cially, he appears to be the usual head-scratching, eye-rolling Negro stereotype. But beneath this mask Ned is a version of John, the archetypical Negro slave of Negro folklore, who always outwits and outtalks his master. Ned masterminds the action of the novel, and in so doing he is revealed as Faulkner's own persona. He is the artist disguised as Negro rogue and schemer.

This suggests that attempts to approach stereotypes strictly in racial terms are, for the Negro writer, very, very dangerous. We must rst question what they conceal; otherwise we place ourselves in the position of rejecting the basic truth concealed in the stereotype along with its obvious falsehood. Truth is much too precious for that.

On the stage of Town Hall a few days before the 1964 Democratic Convention, a group from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party talked of their experiences. To the facile eye one of the men who

talked there might well have been mistaken for the Sambo stereotype. He was Southern and rural; his speech was heavily idiomatic, his tempo slow. A number of his surface characteristics seemed to support the stereotype. But had you accepted him as an incarnation of Sambo, you would have missed a very courageous man, a man who understood only too well that his activities in aiding and protecting the young Northern students working in the Freedom Movement placed his life in constant contact with death, but who continued to act. Now, I'm not going to reject that man because some misinformed person, some prejudiced person sees him as the embodiment of Uncle Tom or Sambo. What's inside you, brother; what's your heart like? What are your real values? What human qualities are hidden beneath your idiom?

Do you think the reason for this is that Negroes in the U.S. are caught, if they allow themselves to be, in a bind? Do you think that the Negro writer then is forced, sometimes, to go away to gain a perspective? Or can he transcend his situation by remaining in it?

Well, again I would say that the individual must do that which is necessary for him individually. However, I would also say that it is not objectively necessary to go away. He might solve his problem by leaving the Village or by leaving Harlem. Harlem has always been a di cult place for Negroes to gain perspective on the national experience, because it has sponsored a false sense of freedom. It has also sponsored a false sense of superiority toward Negroes who live elsewhere. I remember getting into an argument during World War II with a fellow who insisted that Southern Negroes had no knowledge of boxing or baseball. This came from refusing to use his eyes around New York.

As a writer, one frees oneself by actually going in and trying to get the shape of experience *from the writer's perspective*. I see no other way. But unfortunately this requires a writer's type of memory, which is strongly emotional and associative, and a certain amount of technique. You must pay the Negro community the

respect of trying to see it through the enrichening perspectives provided by great literature, using your own intelligence to make up for the di erences in economy, class background, education, conscious culture, manners and attitude toward values. Human beings are basically the same and di er mainly in lifestyle. Here revelation is called for, not argument.

How do you mean "argument"?

I mean that it is futile to argue our humanity with those who willfully refuse to recognize it, when art can reveal on its own terms more truth while providing pleasure, insight and, for Negro readers at least, a rmation and a sense of direction. We must assert our own sense of values, beginning with the given and the irrevocable, with the question of heroism and slavery.

Contrary to some, I feel that our experience as a people involves a great deal of heroism. From one perspective, slavery was horrible and brutalizing.

It is said that “Those Africans were enslaved, they died in the ‘middle passage,’ they were abused, their families were separated, they were whipped, they were raped, ravaged, and emasculated.” And the Negro writer is tempted to agree. “Yes! God damn it, wasn’t that a horrible thing!” But he sometimes agrees to the next step, which holds that slaves had very little humanity because slavery destroyed it for them and their descendants. That’s what the Stanley M. Elkins “Sambo” argument implies. But despite the historical past and the injustices of the present, from *my* perspective there is something further to say. I have to *a rm* my forefathers and I *must* a rm my parents or be reduced in my own mind to a white man’s inadequate —even if unprejudiced—

conception of human complexity. Yes, and I must a rm those unknown people who sacri ced for me. I’m speaking of those Negro Americans who never knew that a Ralph Ellison might exist, but who by living their own lives and refusing to be destroyed by social injustice and white supremacy, real or illusory, made it possible for me to live my own life with meaning. I am forced to look at these

people and upon the history of life in the United States and conclude that there is another reality behind the appearance of reality which they would force upon us as truth.

Any people who could endure all of that brutalization and keep together, who could undergo such dismemberment, resuscitate itself, and endure until it could take the initiative in achieving its own freedom is obviously more than the sum of its brutalization.

Seen in this perspective, theirs has been one of the great human experiences and one of the great triumphs of the human spirit in modern times—in fact in the history of the world.

Some might say to your argument that you are expressing your own hopes and aspirations for Negroes, rather than reporting historical reality.

But hope and aspiration are indeed important aspects of the reality of Negro American history, no less than that of others. Besides, it’s one of our roles as writers to remind ourselves of such matters, just as it is to make

assertions tempered by the things of the spirit. It might sound arrogant to say so, but writers and poets help create or reveal hidden realities by asserting their existence. Otherwise they might as well become social scientists.

I do not nd it a strain to point to the heroic component of our experience, for these seem to me truths which we have long lived by but which we must now recognize consciously. I am not denying the negative things which have happened to us and which continue to happen, but I am compelled to reject all condescending, narrowly paternalistic interpretations of Negro American life and personality from whatever quarters they come, whether white or Negro. Such interpretations would take the negative details of our existence and make them the whole of our life and personality. But literature teaches us that mankind has always de ned itself *against* the negatives thrown it by both society and the universe. It is human will, human hope and human e ort which make the di erence. Let's not forget that the great tragedies not only treat of negative matters,

of violence, brutalities, defeats, but treat them within a context of man's will to act, to challenge reality and to snatch triumph from the teeth of destruction.

You said it's unnecessary for one to leave the country to get a perspective. We notice in some of your older writings that after having come back from Rome, you sat up in New Hampshire and wrote Invisible Man.

No, I started *Invisible Man*—that novel about a man characterized by what the sociologists term "high visibility"—in Vermont, during the few months before the war came to an end. I was cooking on merchant ships at the time and had been given shore leave, so I accepted the invitation of a friend and went up there. I had no idea that I was going to start a book. But maybe I should add this: it isn't *where* you are that's important, but what you seek to depict, and most important of all is perspective. The main perspective through which a writer looks at experience is that provided by literature—

just as the perspective through which a physician looks at the human body is the discipline of medicine, an accumulation of techniques, insights, instruments and processes which have been slowly developed over long

periods of time. So when I look at my material I'm not looking at it simply through the concepts of sociology—and I do know something about sociology. I look at it through literature; English, French, Spanish, Russian —especially nineteenth-century Russian literature. And Irish literature, Joyce and Yeats, and the international literature of the twenties, and through the perspective of folklore. When I listen to a folk story I'm looking for what it conceals as well as what it states. I read it with the same fullness of attention I bring to *Finnegans Wake* or *The Sound and the Fury* because I'm eager to discover what it has to say to me personally.

Living abroad is necessary for those Negro writers who feel that they've been too cramped here and who wish to discover how it feels to live free of racial restrictions. This is valid. I should also say

this: I came to New York from Tuskegee with the intention of going back to nish college. I came up to work. I didn't earn the money, so I stayed. But though I lived at the Harlem YMCA, I did *not* come to New York to live in Harlem, even though I thought of Harlem as a very romantic place. I'm pointing to an attitude of mind; I was not exchanging Southern segregation for Northern segregation, but seeking a wider world of opportunity and, most of all, the excitement and impersonality of a great city. I wanted room in which to discover who I was.

One of the rst things I had to do was to enter places from which I was afraid I might be rejected. I had to confront my own fears of the unknown. I told myself, "Well, I might be hurt, but I won't dodge until they throw a punch." Over and over again I found that it was just this attitude (which nally became unselfconsciously nondefensive) which made the di erence between my being accepted or rejected—and this during a time when many places practiced discrimination.

This requires submitting oneself to personal ordeals, especially if one grew up in the South and Southwest. Nor is this because you are afraid of white people so much as a matter of not wishing to be rebu ed. You don't wish to be upset when you're going to see a play by having a racial hassle on your hands. This distaste is very human.

I've had a white Mississippian stop me on the streets of Rome asking if he would be admitted to a certain place which had caught his eye.

I said, with a certain pleasurable irony, "Sure, go ahead; just tell them you're a friend of mine."

What do you consider the Negro writer's responsibility to American literature as a whole?

Any American writer becomes basically responsible for the health of American literature the moment he starts writing seriously—and this regardless of his race or religious background. This is no arbitrary matter. Just as there is implicit in the act of voting the responsibility of helping to govern, there is implicit in the act of

writing a responsibility for the quality of the American language—

its accuracy, its vividness, its simplicity, its expressiveness—and responsibility for preserving and extending the quality of the literature.

How do you regard President Johnson's statement that "art is not a political weapon"? He made it at the White House in 1965.

I don't think you've got it complete; let's read it. He said, "Your art is not a political weapon, yet much of what you do is profoundly political, for you seek out the common pleasures and visions, the terrors and cruelties of man's day on this planet. And I would hope you would help dissolve the barriers of hatred and ignorance which are the source of so much of our pain and danger."

You think that he is far ahead of many people?

He is far ahead of most of the intellectuals, especially those Northern liberals who have become, in the name of the highest motives, the new apologists for segregation. Some of the *Commentary* writers, for instance. Let's put it this way. President Johnson's speech at Howard University spelled out the meaning of full integration for Negroes in a way that no one, no President, not Lincoln nor Roosevelt, no matter how much we love and

respect them, has ever done before. There was no hedging in it, no escape clauses.

About Robert Lowell's refusal in 1965 to participate in the White House Art Festival, was this justly done, or do you think that he was engaged too much in politics? Do you think it was necessary?

I do not think it was necessary. When Lowell wrote to the President, and it was a skillfully written letter, he stated his motives of conscience, his fear that his presence would commit him to the President's foreign policy. In other words, he feared the potency of

his own presence in such a setting, a potency which would seem to rest in his person rather than in the poetry for which we praise him and consider him great. But he didn't stop there; the letter got to the press, and once this happened it became a political act, a political gesture.

I think this was unfortunate. The President wasn't telling Lowell how to write his poetry, and I don't think he was in any position to tell the President how to run the government. Had I been running the Festival, I would simply have had an actor read from Lowell's poetry—with his permission, of course—for then not only would we have had the best of Lowell, but the question of his feelings about foreign policy wouldn't have come up.

Actually, no one was questioned about his attitudes, political or otherwise except by Dwight Macdonald. It wasn't that kind of occasion. Any and every opinion was represented there. Millard Lampell, who had been picketing the White House, had part of his play presented, and his background is no secret. So it was not in itself a political occasion, and all of the hullabaloo was beside the point. I was amazed, having gone through the political madness that marked the intellectual experience of the thirties, to see so many of our leading American intellectuals, poets and novelists—free creative minds—once again running in a herd. One may take a personal position about a public issue that is much broader than his personal morality, and the others make a herd of free creative minds! Some of my best friends are mixed up in it, which leaves me all the more amazed.

Speaking of herd activity, do you think that writers generally hand together for the added stimulation or appreciation that they need? Or do you think that it is a lack on their part of a certain kind of intelligence?

It depends upon their reason for coming together. I think it important for writers to come together during the early stages of their careers, especially during the stage when they are learning their techniques, when they are struggling for that initial fund of

knowledge on which they form their tastes and on which artistic choices are made. It's good for artists to get together to eat and drink, but when they get together in some sort of political e ort, it usually turns out that they are being manipulated by a person or a group who are not particularly interested in art.

In other words, are you denying what happened to you in the thirties, during the New Masses *experience?*

No, I don't deny that at all; indeed, I speak out of that experience.

But what happened to me during the thirties was part of a great swell of events which I plunged into when I came to town as an undergraduate musician, and through which I gradually transformed myself into a writer. The stimulus that existed in New York during the thirties was by no means limited to art; it was also connected with politics and was part of the *esprit de corps* developed in the country after we had endured the Depression for a few years. It had to do with my discovering New York and the unfamiliar areas of the society newly available to me. It had to do with working on the New York Writers Project, getting to know white friends, and being around Richard Wright, and around the *New Masses* and the League of American Writers crowd.

But if you'll note—and the record is public—I never wrote the o cial type of ction. I wrote what might be called propaganda having to do with the Negro struggle, but my ction was always trying to be something else, something di erent even from Wright's ction. I never accepted the ideology which the *New Masses* attempted to impose on writers. They hated Dostoevsky, but I was studying Dostoevsky. They felt that Henry James

was a decadent snob who had nothing to teach a writer from the lower classes, and I was studying James. I was also reading Marx, Gorki, Sholokhov and Isaac Babel. I was reading everything, including the Bible. Most of all, I was reading Malraux. I thought so much of that little Modern Library edition of *Man's Fate* that I had it bound in leather.

This is where I was really living at the time, so perhaps it is the

writers whose work has most impact upon us that are important, not those with whom we congregate publicly. Anyway, I think style is more important than political ideologies.

Do you see, then, a parallel between the thirties and the sixties, with this new resurgence of young Negro writers, with this turning toward Africa and, shall we say again, the resurgence of a particular kind of provincialism in New Negro writing?

I think that we should be careful in drawing parallels. This is a period of a uence as against the poverty of the Depression. True, during that period a lot of Negroes had the opportunity to work in the WPA at clerical jobs and so on, so that for us the Depression represented in many ways a lunge forward. We were bene ciaries of the government's e orts toward national recovery. Thanks to the national chaos, we found new places for ourselves. Today our lunges forward are facilitated by laws designed precisely to correct our condition as a group—by laws which start at the very top and which have the Supreme Court, the Executive branch and Congress behind them. This is quite di erent from the thirties.

As to Africa, I think it is probably true that more of the present crop of writers are concerned with Africa than was true then. In fact, quite a number who were concerned with Communism are now fervid black nationalists. Oddly enough, however, their way of writing hasn't changed signi cantly. Of course I may not know what I'm talking about, but there seem to be fewer Negro writers around who seem publishable at the moment. Surely there are fewer than the more favorable circumstances of today warrant.

Some people think that you should play a larger part in civil rights. This is similar to Sartre's rebuttal to Camus in Situations*, this idea of* engagement.

Well, I'm no Camus and they're no Sartres. But literature draws upon much deeper and much more slowly changing centers of the

human personality than does politics. It draws mainly from literature itself, and upon the human experience which has abided long enough to have become organized and given signi cance through literature. I think that revolutionary political movements move much too rapidly to be treated as subjects for literature in themselves. When Malraux drew upon revolution as the settings for his novels, he drew for his real themes upon much deeper levels of his characters' consciousness than their concern with Marxism; it was to these deeper concerns, to the realm of tragedy, that they turned when facing death. Besides, political movements arise and extend themselves, achieve themselves, through fostering myths which interpret their actions and goals. If you tell the truth about a politician, you're always going to encounter contradiction and barefaced lies, especially when you're dealing with left-wing politicians.

If I were to write an account of the swings and twitches of the U.S. Communist line during the thirties and forties, it would be a revealing account, but I wouldn't attempt to do it in terms of ction.

It would have to be done in terms of political science and reportage.

You would have to look up their positions, chart their moves, look at the directives handed down by the Communist International, or whatever the overall body was called. You would be in a muck and a mire of dead and futile activity, much of which had little to do with their ultimate goals or with American reality. They fostered the myth that Communism was twentieth-century Americanism, but to be a twentieth-century American meant, in their thinking, that you had to be more Russian than American and less Negro than either.

That's how they lost the Negroes. The Communists recognized no plurality of interests and were really responding to the necessities of Soviet foreign policy, and when the war came, Negroes got caught and were made

expedient in the shifting of policy, just as Negroes who fool around with them today are going to get caught in the next turn of the screw.

Do you think there is too much pressure on the Negro writer to play the role of politician instead of mastering his craft and acting as a

professional writer?

Yes, and if he doesn't resist such pressure, he's in a bad way.

Someone is always going to tell you that you can't write, and then they tell you *what* to write.

Among the rst things the Negro writer has to resist is being told that he'll nd it di cult to make a buck. I waded through tons of that. But I decided that I would make sacri ces, go without clothing and other necessities, in order to buy books, to be in New York where I could talk to certain creative people, and where I could observe this or that phenomenon. Resisting these warnings is most important. But if you de ect this particular pressure, there will always be people who will tell you that you have no talent. We understand the psychological dynamics of it; Booker T. Washington gave it the "crabs in a basket" metaphor: if a Negro threatens to succeed in a eld outside the usual areas of Negro professionals, others feel challenged. It's a protective reaction, a heritage from slavery. We feel "Well, my God, he has the nerve to do that and I don't; what does he think he's doing, endangering the whole group?" Nevertheless, the writer must endure the agony imposed by this group pessimism.

Why do you think this exists?

Because our sense of security and our sense of who we are depends upon our feeling that we can account for each and every member of the group. To this way of thinking, any assertion of individuality is dangerous. I'm reminded of a woman whom I met at a party. We were discussing Negro life and I uttered opinions indicating an approach unfamiliar to her. Her indignant response was "How do you come talking like that? I've never even heard of you!" In her opinion I had no right to express ideas which hadn't been certi ed by her particular social group. Naturally she thought of

herself as a member of a Negro elite, and in the position to know what each and every Negro thought and should think. This is a minority-group

phenomenon, and I won't nail it to Negroes because it happens in the Jewish community as well.

In the interview that you had in Robert Renn Warren's Who Speaks for the Negro? *he addressed a question to you that has something to do with Negroes being culturally deprived, and you answered that many of the white students whom you'd taught were also culturally deprived.*

They were culturally deprived, you said, because while they might have understood many things intellectually, they were emotionally unprepared to deal with them. But the Negro was being prepared emotionally, whether intellectually or not, from the moment he was placed in the crib.

Would you expand on that a bit?

I think you've touched *the* important area that gets lost when we hold such discussions. I get damn tired of critics writing of me as though I don't know how hard it is to be a Negro American. My point is that it isn't *only* hard, but that there are many good things about it.

But they don't want you to say that. This is especially true of some of our Jewish critics. They get quite upset when I say: *I like this particular aspect of Negro life and would not surrender it. What I want is something else to go along with it*. And when I get the other things, I'm not going to try to invade the group life of anybody else.

Of course they don't like the idea that I reject many of the aspects of life which they regard highly. But you know, white people can get terribly disturbed at the idea that Negroes are not simply being restricted from many areas of our national life, but that they are also judging certain aspects of our culture and rejecting their values.

That's where assumptions of white superiority, conscious or unconscious, make for blindness and naïveté. In fact we've rejected many of their values from the days before there were Jim Crow laws.

Only a narrowly sociological explanation of society could lead to the belief that we Negroes are what we are simply because whites have refused us the right of choice through racial discrimination.

Frequently Negroes are able to pay for commodities available in stores, but we reject them as a matter of taste, not economics. There is no *de facto* Jim Crow in many areas of New York, but we don't frequent them, not because we think we won't be welcome—indeed, many Negroes go to places precisely because they are unfairly and illegally rejected—but because they simply don't interest us. All this *we* know to be true.

Negro Americans had to learn to live under pressure; otherwise we'd have been wiped out, or in the position of the Indians, set on a reservation and rendered powerless by opposing forces. Fortunately our fate was di erent. We were forced into segregation, but within that situation we were able to live close to the larger society and to abstract from it enough combinations of values, including religion and hope and art, which allowed us to endure and impose our own idea of what the world should be, of what man should be, and of what American society should be. I'm not speaking of power here, but of vision, of values and dreams. Yes, and of will.

What is missing today is a corps of artists and intellectuals who can evaluate Negro American experience from the inside, and out of a broad knowledge of how people of other cultures live, deal with experience and give signi cance to their experience. We do too little of this. Rather, we depend upon outsiders—mainly sociologists—to interpret our lives for us. It doesn't seem to occur to us that our interpreters might well be not so much prejudiced as ignorant, insensitive and arrogant. It doesn't occur to us that they might be of shallow personal culture, or innocent of the complexities of actual living.

It is ironic that we act this way, because over and over again when we nd bunches of Negroes enjoying themselves, when they're feeling good and in a mood of communion, they sit around and marvel at what a damnably marvelous human being, what a confounding human type the Negro American really is. This is the underlying signi cance of so many of our bull sessions. We exchange accounts of what happened to someone whom the

group once knew. “You know what that so-and-so did,” we say, and then his story is told. His crimes, his loves, his outrages, his adventures,

his transformations, his moments of courage, his heroism, bu ooneries, defeats and triumphs are recited, with each participant joining in. This catalogue soon becomes a brag, an exciting chant celebrating the metamorphosis which this individual in question underwent within the limited circumstances available to us.

This is wonderful stu ; in the process the individual is enlarged.

It’s as though a transparent overlay of archetypal myth is being placed over the life of an individual, and through him we see ourselves. Of course, this is what literature does with life; these verbal jam sessions are indeed a form of folk literature and they help us to de ne our own experience.

But when we Negro Americans start “*writing*,” we lose this wonderful capacity for abstracting and enlarging life. Instead we ask, “How do we t into the sociological terminology? Gunnar Myrdal said this experience means thus and so. And Dr. Kenneth Clark or Dr. E. Franklin Frazier says the same thing …” We try to t our experience into their concepts. Well, whenever I hear a Negro intellectual describing Negro life and personality with a catalogue of negative de nitions, my rst question is: how did you escape? Is it that you were born exceptional and superior? If I cannot look at the most brutalized Negro on the street, even when he irritates me and makes me want to bash his head in because he’s goo ng o , I must still say within myself, “Well, that’s you too, Ellison.” I’m not talking about guilt, but of an identi cation which goes beyond race.

You have said that Hemingway tells us much more about how Negroes feel than all the writings done by those people mixed up in the Negro Renaissance.

What I meant was this: Hemingway’s writing of the twenties and the thirties, even of the forties, evoked certain basic, deeply felt moods and attitudes within his characters which closely approximated certain basic attitudes held by many Negroes about their position in American society, and about their sense of the human predicament.

He did this not only because he was a greater writer than the

participants in the Negro Renaissance, but because he possessed a truer sense of what the valid areas of perplexity were and a more accurate sense of how to get life into literature. He recognized that the so-called “Jazz Age” was a phony, while most Negro writers jumped on that illusory bandwagon when they, of all people, should have known better.

I was also referring to Hemingway’s characters’ attitude toward society, to their morality, their code of technical excellence, to their stoicism, their courage or “grace under pressure,” to their skepticism about the validity of political rhetoric and all those abstractions in the name of which our society was supposed to be governed, but which Hemingway found highly questionable when measured against our actual conduct. Theirs was an attitude springing from an awareness that they lived outside the values of the larger society, and I feel that their attitudes came close to the way Negroes felt about the way the Constitution and the Bill of Rights were applied to us.

Further, I believe that in depicting the attitudes of athletes, expatriates, bull ghters, traumatized soldiers and impotent idealists, Hemingway told us quite a lot about what was happening to that most representative group of Negro Americans, jazz musicians—who also lived by an extreme code of withdrawal, technical and artistic excellence, and rejection of the values of respectable society. They replaced the abstract and much-betrayed ideals of that society with the more physical values of eating, drinking, copulating, loyalty to friends and dedication to the discipline and values of their art.

I say all this while fully aware that Hemingway seldom depicted Negroes, and that when he did they were seldom the types we prefer to encounter in ction. But to see what I mean, one has only to look upon the world of Hemingway’s ction as o ering a valid metaphor not only for the predicament of young whites, but as a metaphor for the post-World War I period generally. Seen in this inclusive light, he tells us a hell of a lot about the way Negroes were feeling and acting.

At any rate, this is how I use literature to come to an understanding of our situation. It doesn’t have to be, thank God, *about* Negroes in order to give

us insights into our own predicament.

You do not, to my way of thinking, assume that a writer can treat of his times, if he writes well, without revealing a larger segment of life than that of the speci c milieu which engages his attention; if it is to be valid it must go beyond and touch the reality of other groups and individuals. Faulkner tells us a great deal about many di erent groups who were not his immediate concern because he wrote so truthfully. If you would nd the imaginative equivalents of certain civil rights gures in American writing—Rosa Parks and James Meredith, say—you don't go to most ction by Negroes, but to Faulkner.

You have said that you don't accept any theory which implies that culture is transmitted through the genes. What, then, is your reaction to the concept of "négritude"?

To me it represents the reverse of that racism with which prejudiced whites approach Negroes. As a theory of art it implies precisely that culture is transmitted through the genes. It is a blood theory.

There are members of my family who are very black, and there are some who are very white—which means that I am very much Negro, very much Negro American, and quite representative of that racial type with its mixture of African, European and indigenous American blood. This is a biological fact, but recognizing this, loving my family, and recognizing that I'm bound to them by blood and family tradition is by no means to agree with the proponents of négritude. Because even while I a rm our common bloodline, I recognize that we are bound less by blood than by our cultural and political circumstances.

Further, I don't believe that my form of expression springs from Africa, although it might be easier for me as an artist if it did, because then, perhaps, a massive transfusion of pure Nigerian blood would transform me into a great sculptor. I've been reading the

classics of European and American literature since childhood, and was born to the American tongue, the language of the Bible and the Constitution; these, for better or worse, shaped my thought and attitudes and pointed the

direction of my talent long before I became a conscious writer. I also inherited a group style originated by a “black” people, but it is Negro American, not African; it was taught to me by Negroes, or copied by me from those among whom I lived most intimately.

All this is similar to the notion that Negroes have a corner on soul. *Well, we don’t.*

You’re right, and anyone who listens to a Beethoven quartet or symphony and can’t hear *soul* is in trouble. Maybe they can hear the sound of blackness, but they’re deaf to *soul*.

Richard Wright was called a white man.

I’ve had something like that happen. When I was teaching at Bard College a young Negro girl approached one of my white colleagues and said, “Is this Mr. Ellison a Negro?” I can’t understand that; it sounds as if she was putting him on, because there I was facing classes with my big African nose, teaching American literature and highlighting the frame so that they could become aware of the Negro experience in it, and she wants to know whether I’m Negro! I suppose the social patterns are changing faster than we can grasp.

Recently we had a woman from the South who helped my wife around the house but who goofed o so frequently that she was red. We liked her and really wanted her to stay, but she simply wouldn’t do her work. My friend Albert Murray told me I shouldn’t be puzzled over the outcome. “You know how we can be sometimes,” Al said. “She saw the books and furniture and paintings, so she knew you were some kind of white man. You couldn’t possibly be a Negro, so she gured she could get away with a little boondoggling on general principles, because she’d probably

been getting away with a lot of stu with Northern whites. But what she didn’t stop to notice was that you’re a *Southern* white man …”

You see, here culture and race and a preconception of how Negroes are supposed to live—a question of taste—had come together and caused a comic confusion. Jokes like Al Murray’s are meaningful because in

America culture is always cutting across racial characteristics and social designations. Therefore if a Negro doesn't exhibit certain attitudes, or if he reveals a familiarity with aspects of the culture, or possesses qualities of personal taste which the observer has failed to note among Negroes, such confusions in perception are apt to occur.

But the basic cause is, I think, that we are all members of a highly pluralistic society. We possess two cultures—both American—and many aspects of the broader American culture are available to Negroes who possess the curiosity and taste, if not the money, to cultivate them. It is often overlooked, especially in our current state of accelerated mobility, that it is becoming increasingly necessary for Negroes themselves to learn who they are *as Negroes*. Cultural in uences have always out anked racial discrimination wherever and whenever there were Negroes receptive to them, even in slavery times. I read the books which were to free me for my work as a writer while studying at Tuskegee Institute, Macon County, Alabama, during a time when most of the books weren't even taught. Back in 1937,1 knew a Negro who swept the oors at Wright Field in Dayton, Ohio, who was nevertheless designing planes and entering his designs in contests. He was working as a porter, but his mind, his ambitions and his attitudes were those of an engineer. He wasn't waiting for society to change; he was changing it by himself.

What advice would you give to a young person of eighteen who was setting out to be a writer?

My rst advice would be to make up his mind to the possibility that he might have to go through a period of depriving himself in order

to write. I'd remind him that he was entering into a very stern discipline, and that he should be quite certain that he really wanted to do this to the extent of arranging his whole life so that he could get it done. He should regard writing the way a young physician is required to regard his period of training. Next, I'd advise him to read everything, all the good books he could manage, especially those in the literary form in which he desires to become creative.

Because books contain the culture of the chosen form, and because one learns from the achievements of other writers. Here is contained the knowledge which he must have at his ngertips as he projects his own vision. Without it, no matter how sensitive, intelligent or passionate he is, he will be incomplete.

Beyond that, he shouldn't take the easy escape of involving himself exclusively in *talking* about writing, or carrying picket signs, or sitting-in as a substitute activity. While he might become the best picket in the world, or the best sitter-inner, his writing will remain where he left it.

Finally, he should avoid the notion that writers require no education. Often Hemingway and Faulkner are summoned up to support this argument, because they didn't nish college. What is overlooked is that these were gifted, brilliant men, and very well-read men of great intellectual capacity. No matter how you acquire an education, you must have it. You must know your society, and know it beyond your own neighborhood or region. You must know its manners, ideals and conduct. You should also know something of what's happening in the sciences, religion, government, and the other arts.

I suppose what I'm saying is that this young writer should have a working model of society and of our national characteristics present within his mind. The problem of enriching that model and keeping it up-to-date is one of the greatest challenges to the Negro writer, who is, by de nition, cut o from rsthand contact with large areas of that society—especially from those centers where power is translated into ideas, manners and values. Nevertheless, this can be an advantage, because in this country no writer should take

anything for granted, but must use his imagination to question and penetrate the façade of things. Indeed, the integration of American society on the level of the imagination is one of this young writer's basic tasks. It is one way in which he is able to possess his world, and in his writings help shape the values of large segments of a society which otherwise would not admit his existence, much less his right to participate or to judge.

This interview (given in 1965), which the author has revised from the original tapes, was conducted by three young Negro writers: James Thompson, Lennox Raphael and Steve Cannon. It appeared in *Harper's Magazine* in March 1967.

The Novel as a Function of American Democracy I am a writer who writes very slowly; because of this, I am often tempted to convince myself that I should spend a lot of time theorizing about what the novel is. One fact I am sure about: the writing of novels is the damnedest thing that I ever got into, and I've been into some damnable things. Nevertheless, there is a certain sincerity in my choice of the title for this address; you will note, however, that I do not say that all novels have a nonartistic function or that they owe something to American democracy. But I do happen to feel that in this country the novel, a particular art form to which I am giving my life, found a function which it did not have in any of the nations where it was developed by artists who made it resound so e ectively with their eloquence.

As you know, the emergence of the novel occurred at a time when the stability of social class lines was being shaken. (Please don't let my use of the term "class lines" upset you.) Although the conception of freedom existed before the eighteenth century, it was revitalized during that century of many wars and revolutions; societies began to change, new classes to emerge; new values were established.

Traditional forms were modi ed; the conception of kingship gave way to the conception of democracy and individualism. Change was everywhere.

One of the aesthetic results of this change was the emergence of a literary form which could project the shirtings of society with a facility and an intimacy that had not existed before, either in the theater or in romantic poetry. This form was much concerned with the emergence of new personality types, with what was happening to tradition, as individuals began to explore the nature of possibility which had been brought about for them through the crack-ups of the old society. The writers themselves were challenged into taking all the traditional forms—oral storytelling, the ballad, poetry, drama

—and exploiting them in this new medium of the novel. All of this was necessary, because people no longer knew exactly who they were. They knew that they were doing things; they knew that there were changes; they knew that they were connected to the old values and sometimes wore the old clothing. But inside they felt di erent; they felt the need to test themselves against the new possibilities because it *was possible* to test themselves. If Robinson Crusoe wanted to go to a desert isle, he took with him certain techniques, certain values, from whence he came; these he adapted to the new environment and to the people whom he found on his isle. Such a plot proved exciting, and it projected for the reader a sense of reality, a sense of what was immanent, a sense of what was possible for himself.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the novel had become a recognized art form which had absorbed all the unstructured techniques of narrative, whether oral or literary, that had preceded it. In the hands of such novelists as Dostoevsky, Flaubert and Melville it had become a literary form which, along with its powers to entertain, was capable of deadly serious psychological and philosophical explorations of the human predicament.

As I see it, the novel has always been bound up with the idea of nationhood. What are we? Who are we? What has the experience of the particular group been? How did it become this way? What is it that stopped us from attaining the ideal? In Russian literature, particularly, we can see this clearly as we follow the work of Pushkin, who wrote knowingly of the super uous individual, the dilettante, the man of great sensitivity and great possibilities who could not nd his way in a society that had been unable to break away from the stagnation of life inherent to that period of Russian history.

In reading Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, one can see the drawing out, the investigation, of what the idea of the super uous individual amid the stagnated society had to suggest to men who came later and who chose the novel as a means of exploring reality. It is the very nature of this exploration which attracts me to the novel, and which causes me to take it very

seriously. I can say this without any reference to my personal abilities, which are limited. The novel is a form which deals with change in human

personality and human society, bringing to the surface those values, patterns of conduct and dilemmas, psychological and technological, which abide within the human predicament. It can abstract, from the ow and fury of existence, these patterns, which are abiding, and recreate them in the forms of artistic models that can be controlled and imbued with the personal values of the writer, down even to the last punctuation mark. In other words, the novel is a way of possessing life, slowing it down, and giving it the writer's own sense of values in a delicately and subtly structured way. All this, of course, is not simply a matter of entertaining, but is a way of confronting reality, the nature of the soul and the nature of society. As a form, the novel permits a writer to survive the consequences of encountering the chaos he must reckon with when he attempts to deal with the basic truths of human existence.

In turning now to the American novel, I wish to emphasize that the American nation is based upon revolution, dedicated to change through basic concepts stated in the Bill of Rights and the Constitution. It is dedicated also to the ideal of an *open* society, a society in which a great landmass allowed peoples to move about, to change their identities if they would, to advance themselves, to achieve results based on their own talents and techniques. With such a society, it seems only natural that the novel existed to be exploited by certain personality types who found their existence within the United States. What I am trying to describe is the relationship between the form in which I work and the society as I see it. Of course the rst writers of any stature in the United States were not novelists; they were essayists, preachers, philosophers and poets. When I think of the meaning of the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson, now dismissed as being a little too much on the optimistic side, I remind myself that there was a need for his optimism. Some voice had to be raised to remind Americans that they were not

Europeans. Emerson's essays ful lled a need precisely because Americans existed in a society and a country which was not very tightly structured and in which no one, at that time especially, could set a limit upon individual possibility, certainly not at the level of the imagination.

Such limits might have been set on the slaves; even so, there was always some slave who confounded the general conception. So the Emersons, Whitmans and Thoreaus reminded us that the stance of secession had its own value. They told us that this stance was an obligation for us, not only as Americans but as members of a civilization, actors in a long, continued action which started before history and which, through some miracle, produced on this land, after bloody assaults, the condition in which, we hoped, human society could make a leap forward. Someone had to tell us that the price we pay for progress is terrible, but that we cannot a ord to close our eyes and stop.

These early writers enjoined us to experience nature and society to the hilt. They asked us to interrogate ourselves, nature and the universe by way of realizing ourselves, by way of paying our debt to history. The Whitmans were necessary to point out to us that this was a lyrical as well as a rugged experience. There is nothing like having a harsh reality nudging you along to make you feel that there is some virtue in song. I am not suggesting, by the way, that life is best for the poet or novelist when it is harshest. What I am saying is that when we are closest to the tragic realities of human existence, we have a deeper appreciation for song and for the lyric mode. Be that as it may, let me remind you that almost as early as the great European nations produced great novelists, this country also produced a few great novelists and some great poets. But as remarkable as this is, it must be remembered that we are a continuation of a European civilization, not an entity in ourselves, although our variations upon the theme and our ampli cation of the themes are unique.

The Melvilles and Hawthornes, however, were a part of our early nineteenth century; by midcentury this country had reached a

certain crisis, implicit in our approach to the new possibility of freedom, a crisis so profound that we fought a civil war, one of the bloodiest in history. It was then that America produced Henry James, Mark Twain and Stephen Crane. By the time I began to write, Henry James was considered a snob, an upper-class expatriate who in New York and around Boston had fallen into some sort of decadent hothouse in which his head became much too large for his body. His sensibility was considered too delicate to interest anyone

who was a real man concerned with the things of this world as they existed. It was forgotten, however, that James came on the scene at a time when abolitionists were coming in and out of his father's house, and that he was part of a period in which there was great intellectual, religious and civil rights ferment. Few critics recalled that in that war James lost one of his older brothers, who had been a member of Colonel Shaw's Massachusetts regiment of free slaves.

It was also forgotten that James's second published story, "The Story of a Year," was based on an incident which occurred in the Civil War. But what does all of this have to do with Henry James? He was, at rst glance, a novelist highly conscious of the form of the novel as an artistic unity, one of the rst writers, European or American, to rationalize, or to attempt to rationalize, an aesthetic of the novel. He was a writer with a great and subtle awareness of how the novel di ered from all other forms of narrative and drama and other forms of storytelling, one who knew how characters function and relate to each other, who knew that they had to function as an organic form.

Thematically James knew much more. He recognized—as demonstrated in his novel *The Bostonians*—that in his time the United States had reached a moment of crisis, and in fact that he was writing during a new period in the life of the nation, when the lyrical belief in the possibilities of the Constitution and the broadness of the land was no longer so meaningful. Mindful that hundreds of thousands of men had died in the Civil War, James knew for his own time what Emerson knew for his. Emerson constantly reminded Americans that they had to discover the new possibilities of the new land. What James realized was that the old

enduring evil of the human predicament had raised its face, revealing itself within this land. This evil could no longer be confronted in the name of religion, kingship or aristocracy, although James was himself an aristocrat. James recognized that each and every individual who lived within the society had to possess, and to be concerned with, the most subtle type of moral consciousness. He was as aware of the labyrinth in which Americans walk as was Emerson. Yet neither man liked the other, perhaps because they approached the same reality from di erent positions and through di erent

disciplines. Today not many people read James, although he is by no means an ignored writer. For me one minor test of this is the fact that I don't know of many Negro youngsters who are named Henry James Jones. There were, and are, a number who are named Waldo, and I happen to be one of them. Amusing as this is, it reveals something of how the insight and values of literature get past the usual barriers in society and seep below the expected levels. I shall speak more of this later.

Another major writer of this midcentury period was Stephen Crane. Younger than James, Crane nonetheless lived during his lifetime, a young man from upstate New York, born into a Methodist family well known for its preachers. At twenty-nine this young man, who had never experienced warfare, wrote one of our classics, *The Red Badge of Courage*, a unique book about the Civil War, one which was praised at rst precisely because the writer was too young to have experienced warfare. Indeed, it is a unique book about *any* war. What was missed, of course, was the fact that Crane used the Civil War as a metaphor for the human condition in the United States. Here is a book about a war in which you see no close-ups of generals. Whenever o cers come on the scene, we feel that the camera in the motion picture has been withdrawn about the length of a football eld. You can never quite get up to the brass, but you get very close to the dead, even to seeing the ants crawling out of their eye sockets, and you get the fury and panic of deadly action.

Most important, you penetrate deeply into the mind of an uninstructed American who had no idea what the war was about, an American for whom the encounter was almost totally personal until

he broke and ran and found himself in the false position of pretending that he was a hero when he knew within his soul that he was a coward. Having no conception of the overall strategy of battle, he was the dismembered little man, caught up in a great social action.

Here was the other side, you see, of the early American conception that every man was a king, a philosopher, every American the possessor of insight into the complexity of things, standing right at the tip point of history. No. For Crane the American was a man who tested himself in terms of his personal courage, his moral courage, his ability and willingness to tell

himself the truth about himself. *The Red Badge of Courage* o ered its readers a metaphor for their own feelings about their relationship to their society. Its signi cance lay not in the fact that the young man who wrote it had never seen war, but in its articulation for its readers of a sense of loss, a loss of faith and direction, after the great crisis of the Civil War. It is this same sense of loss which James celebrates in his novel *The Bostonians*, a portrait not of courageous people who had fought for abolition while living their lives with quivering nerves and searching intellect, but instead a portrait of a people who had lost their sense of direction and who were oundering in many ways. Even the theme of homosexuality—in this instance, female homosexuality—was introduced, not to shock the reader but to indicate how profound the disintegration of moral tone was in the Boston of that day.

Another book which states the moral predicament of its times, metaphorically, is *Huckleberry Finn*. Written by a white Southerner who had been freed of certain narrow prejudices, the novel dramatizes in a poignant and amusing way the social aspect of the civil rights problem. No great philosopher, Twain was nevertheless a great moralist and storyteller. Like Uncle Remus, he was a great entertainer, a man who looked sharply at reality and made distinctions between what we said we were (our ideals) and how we acted (our conduct). *Huckleberry Finn* projected the truth about slavery, and it will be many years in this country before there will ever again be a novelist so popular, so loved, so understood by

people who simply were unable to confront the real moral predicament of their nation in any way other than in the pages of a story.

In the works of all of these men—James, Crane and Twain—the novel was never used merely as a medium of entertainment. These writers suggested possibilities, courses of action, stances against chaos. In their work, as in those who followed them—Hemingway and Fitzgerald, for example—the novel functioned beyond entertainment in helping create the American conception of America.

When Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn*, some people of my background were already writing, but there were few people indeed who were close to the complexity of this particular aspect of American experience. I don’t say this

to in ate the experience, but to point to the fact that in this country there is no absolute separation of groups. The American language, this rich, marvelous, relatively unexplored organ, is the creation of many people, and it began with the Indians. As we walk through the streets of our cities their names sing in our heads; great poetry has been made of them, but we do not realize that they are Indian names. We forget, conveniently sometimes, that the language which we speak is not English, although it is based on English. We forget that our language is such a exible instrument because it has had so many dissonances thrown into it—from Africa, from Mexico, from Spain, from, God knows, everywhere. Yet it has been reduced to a working, exible, highly poetic language. I note this in order to say that what is happening in what you now like to call the ghettos, or what was once called the plantations, didn't simply stay there. These milieux in uenced how you pronounced your name, how you walked, the things you ate, the tunes you whistled; these things frequently found their way into larger cultures, something we now call the mainstream. When Jewish immigrants arrived in great waves from Europe and settled on the Lower East Side, cultural variations occurred there but found their way into other areas. In this sense, our national style is a product of these elusive variations of styles,

manners and customs which emerged from our many sub-communities.

Even today America remains an undiscovered country. Recall, for instance, the shock experienced by the nation when Adam Powell was thrown out of Congress, and people in the Eighteenth District of New York were heard to say: "Put him back, dammit." There is a mystery in this country because we live where we are, wear the same clothing, listen to the same television programs, worship the same God, read the same textbooks, have the same heroes in sports, politics and music. We are at once very uni ed, and at the same time diversi ed. On many levels we don't know who we are, and there are always moments of confrontation where we meet as absolute strangers. Race is by no means the only thing which divides us in this still-undiscovered country. We're only a partially achieved nation, and I think this is good because it gives the writer of novels a role beyond that of entertainer. The novel's function permits him a maximum freedom to express his own vision of reality. It allows him to write out of his own group background and his own individual background. But the novel also

places upon him a responsibility of reporting—imaginatively of course—what is going on in his particular area of the American experience. How does the individual take the strains of his past and use them to illuminate his own sense of life? How are the great American ideals made manifest in his own particular environment? What is his sense of the good life? What is his sense of high style? What is his sense of the moral dilemma of the nation? These questions and their answers are the novelist's responsibilities. If we do not know as much about ourselves now, if we nd that we read sociology and history more than we read novels, it is not our fault as readers. It is the fault of the novelist because he has failed his obligation to tell the truth, to describe with eloquence and imagination life as it appears from wherever he nds his being. It is easy to say this but it's very di cult to do, because in this country there is a tradition of forgetfulness, of moving on, of denying the past, of converting the

tragic realities of ourselves but most often of others—even if those others are of our own group—into comedy.

Today we are an a uent society and yet we're unhappy. We no longer know what truth is. We no longer recognize heroism when it is demonstrated to us. We do not understand the nature of forbearance. Far too often we do not take advantage of the wonderful opportunity which we have to project ourselves into the lives of other people—not to modify those lives but to understand them, to add dimensions to our own sense of wonder and sense of the possibility of living in a society like this. We don't know what to do with our money—even poor people. Apparently we have no defenses before the great cacophony of styles poured upon us through the marvelous medium of television. Our streets look like circuses. Our sense of taste seems to have been lost. We don't seem to know where we are. Some responsibility for this must rest with our novelists, for once they attain their fame they begin to forget where they came from; they begin to doubt where they can go.

The state of our novel is not healthy at the moment. Instead of aspiring to project a vision of the complexity and diversity of the total experience, the novelist loses faith and falls back upon something which is called "black comedy"—which is neither black nor comic, but is a cry of despair. Talent,

technique and artistic competence are there, but a certain necessary faith in human possibility before the next unknown is not there. I speak from my own sense of the dilemma and of what people who work in my form owe to those who would read us seriously, and who are willing to pay us the respect of lending their imaginations to ours.

The novel was not invented by an American, nor even for Americans, but we are a people who have perhaps most need of it—

a form which can produce imaginative models of the total society if the individual writer has the imagination, and can endow each character, scene and punctuation mark with his own sense of value.

If there had been more novelists with the courage of Mark Twain, James or Hemingway, we would not be in the moral confusion in which we nd ourselves today. If we do not know good from bad,

cowardice from heroism, the marvelous from the mundane and banal, then we don't know who we are. It is a terrible thing to sit in a room with a typewriter and dream, and to tell the truth by telling e ective lies, but this seems to be what many novelists opt for.

Certainly this society will read books, and we as writers have the responsibility of not disappointing it. It is an old cliché that to have great writers you must have great readers. Yet I suspect that American readers have been irresponsible, too, because they have not said precisely why they nd the works of modern novelists wanting.

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Perspective of Literature

WHEN I was a young boy I often went out to the Oklahoma State Capitol, where I assisted Mr. J. D. Randolph with his duties as custodian of the State Law Library. I was about eleven years old at the time, quite impressionable, and very curious about the mysterious legal goings-on of the legislators. All

the more so because while I was never able to observe the legislature in session, it was not at all unusual for me to look up from pushing a broom or dusting a desk to see one of the legislators dash into the library to ask Je — Mr. Randolph was always addressed by his rst name—his opinion regarding some point of law. In fact, I soon came to look forward to such moments because I was amazed by the frequency with which Mr. Randolph managed to come up with satisfactory answers, even without consulting the heavy volumes which ranged the walls.

I wasn't surprised that Mr. Randolph was a janitor instead of a lawyer or legislator; Oklahoma was segregated at the time, and Afro-Americans were strictly limited in their freedom to participate in the process of government. We could obey or break laws, but not make or interpret them. In view of this, I was amazed that Mr.

Randolph had come to know so much about the subject. This was a tantalizing mystery, but the fact that white men of power would show no shame in exploiting the knowledge of one far beneath them in status aroused my sense of irony. That after all was simply another example of white folks taking advantage of black folks.

I was more impressed with the fact that Mr. Randolph could carry so many of the mysterious details of the laws which governed the state of Oklahoma within his own head. I knew he had been one of the rst schoolteachers in the city and the state, and that he read and owned a large collection of books. But just how he had come to learn the law was part of an experience about which I was never to

hear him talk. I did know, however, that he had never attended college, and I was aware that many of our greatest lawyers had acquired their legal knowledge through the process of "reading" law with licensed members of the profession.

I only knew that Mr. Randolph appeared to possess a surer grasp of law than certain legislators, and my youthful sense of justice led me to see his exclusion from the profession as an act of injustice. I never heard him complain about the situation, but I felt that there was something shameful, even degrading, about such a state of a airs, and that there was something

rotten in the lawyers, if not indeed in the law itself. Nor was it possible for me to ignore the obvious fact that race was a source of that rot, and that even within the mystery of the legal process, the law was colored and rigged against my people.

Later I became aware of the existence of a Negro lawyer, a Mr.

Harrison, who was so skilled and eloquent that he got himself chased out of the state. Fortunately he landed in Chicago, where in time he became an Assistant Attorney General. Following this incident, however, there was much barbershop conversation centered on the Harrison a air, his legal skill, his way with words, and the inability of white lawyers and judges to stomach a Negro more knowledgeable in the law than themselves. Interestingly enough, the men who engaged in these conversations while I shined shoes or swept the oors directed their disapproval not so much against law in general, but against those persons and forces that imposed the law undemocratically.

This was a period during which the struggle to attain an anti-lynching bill was at its height, and Mr. Roscoe Dunjee, the editor and publisher of our local black newspaper, was writing eloquent editorials suggesting that the real ground for solving the racial predicament rested in the Constitution. I read his editorials, but I must confess that in my youthful cynicism I didn't quite believe them. Anyway, the men in the barbershop believed in the spirit of the law, if not in its application.

As for me, I saw no hope in the law. It was to be obeyed in everyday a airs, but in instances of extreme pressure it was to be

de ed, even at the cost of one's life. In our common usage, law was associated more with men than with statutes. Law-enforcement o cers in our usage were "Laws," and many were men with reputations for being especially brutal toward Negroes.

If such men were the cutting edge of the racially biased law, those above them were seldom better. "Alfalfa Bill" Murray, who took great pride in his knowledge of Roman constitutions, was the governor of the state and a loudmouthed white supremacist. One occupant of the local bench, a certain

Judge Estes, was famous for a quip made from the bench, to the e ect that a Model T Ford full of Negroes ranging at large on the streets of the city was a more devastating piece of bad luck than having one's path crossed by a squad of thirteen howling jet-black tomcats. Well, we laughed, but we held it against him. With such opinions issuing from the bench, I felt little inspired to trust the fairness of judges.

During the Depression I noted something else about the relationship between the law and the attitudes of people—in this instance mostly white —who were su ering from the breakdown of economic order. This came in the form of their reaction to "Pretty Boy" Floyd, who at the time was in constant ight and on a rampage of lawbreaking, but was frequently given sanctuary in Oklahoma City by law-abiding citizens. This was true not only of the city itself, but of towns all around Oklahoma. It puzzled me.

During June of 1933,1 found myself traveling by freight train in an e ort to reach Tuskegee Institute in time to take advantage of a scholarship granted me. Having little money and no time left in which to earn the fare for a ticket, I grabbed an armful of freight car, a form of illegal travel quite common during the Great Depression. In fact so many young men and women, prostitutes, gamblers, and even some respectable but impoverished elderly and middle-aged couples were hoboing that it was di cult for the railroad to control such passengers. I justi ed this out of sheer desperation, college being my one hope of improving my condition.

But I was young and adventurous and regarded hoboing as the next best thing to oating down the Mississippi on a raft. My head was full of readings of the *Rover Boys* and *Huckleberry Finn*. I converted

hoboing into a lark until I found myself in the freight yards of Decatur, Alabama, where two white railroad detectives laying about them with the barrels of long nickel-plated .45 revolvers forced some forty or fty of us, black and white alike, o the train and ordered us to line up along the tracks. For me, this was a frightening moment. Not only was I guilty of stealing passage on a freight train, but I realized that I had been caught in the act in the very town where, at that moment, the *Scottsboro* case was being tried. The case and the incident leading to it had been widely reported in the black press, and what I had read of the atmosphere of the trial led me to believe

that the young men in the case had absolutely no possibility of receiving a just decision. As I saw it, the trial was a macabre circus, a kangaroo proceeding that would be soon followed by an enactment of the gory rite of lynching, that ultimate form of racial victimage.

I had no idea of what the detectives intended to do with me, but given the atmosphere of the town, I feared that it would be unpleasant and brutal. I, too, might well be a sacri cial scapegoat simply because I was of the same race as the accused young men then being prepared for death. Therefore when a group of white boys broke and ran, I plunged into their midst, and running far closer to the ground than I had ever managed to do as a high school football running back, kept moving until I came to a shed with a railroad loading dock, under which I scooted; there I remained until dawn, when I grabbed the rst thing that was smoking and headed south. A few days later I reached Tuskegee, but that scrape with the law—the fear, horror and sense of helplessness before legal injustice

—was most vivid in my mind, and it has so remained.

Recently a television dramatization of the *Scottsboro* case presented one of the judges that sat on the case as its hero. I was made aware of the snarl of personal and public motives, political and private interests, which had become the focus of the case. I was aware of the many factors locked in contention in the name of the purity of white womanhood, and as a writer I came to ask myself just why was it that American ction had given so little attention to

the law. Why has the lawyer or the judge seldom appeared in our literature, serious or popular, in heroic roles?

One answer is that the presentation of the law in an unfavorable light allows for the formal expression and sharing of attitudes which are impious and irreverent, and that given such attitudes, they must be socially controlled, made visible and socialized; otherwise they might be a force for the destruction of social order.

When one recalls Mark Twain’s drawing of the judge in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, he comes across as something of a self-serving

hypocrite.

Or compare the following incident from *Pudd'nhead Wilson:* Mr.

Wilson appears before a reception committee expecting to make a name for himself in the town, but the proceedings are interrupted by the barking of a dog, whereupon Wilson says, "I wish that I owned one half of that dog."

And someone said, "One half of the dog? What would you do with one *half* of the dog?"

He said, "I would kill my half."

Whereupon these legal-minded gentlemen looked at one another and said, "Could he be serious? Doesn't he realize that if he kills his half of the dog, the other owner, the owner of the other half will be upset, will bring litigation against him, and that he will end up in all kinds of trouble?"

Well, for being irreverent on the matter of ownership, poor Wilson was named "Pudd'nhead" and spent most of his life as an alien in the town.

When we recall Melville's *Benito Cereño,* and place it back in its historical perspective, we realize that it was in uenced by the *Armistad* a air, a case in which a group of Africans were brought to trial at the insistence of Spain because they had revolted against the Spaniards who had sought to enslave them, killed several of the o cers, and in attempting to sail the ship back to their homeland, found themselves o the coast of New England. Melville takes the incident and makes of it one of his nest works of ction.

But what puzzles me a bit—and I know better than to be puzzled about such things—was why he made nothing of the fact that these

Africans were freed by having been represented in court by John Quincy Adams. Remember, this was a time of slavery in our own country, and that it cost Mr. Adams something just to take that case.

At any rate, Melville did not bother with the lawyer on that occasion.

But in *Bartleby the Scrivener*, we are introduced to the title character by his boss, a Wall Street lawyer who, for all of his goodwill, is as imperceptive in grasping the basic connotation as Captain Delano of *Benito Cereño* is unable to grasp the human complexity of the Africans who believed, like himself, so much in freedom that they were willing to kill for it.

I am not going to burden you with recounting the legal climate of 1894, when Mark Twain published *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. I will only remind you that it was a period of great theft, of much legal skulduggery, and no doubt this had something to do with the presentation. But if we think a little bit about Mark Twain as a humorist, and think about literary form as having a social function, perhaps Twain was being far more than irreverent when he presented men of the legal profession in a comic light, because by so presenting them he allowed people who were very upset by some of the legal goings-on in the society to reveal their feelings, to laugh at themselves, and most impious of all, to laugh at the courts and perhaps at the Constitution itself.

At some point people, especially American people, are pushed to recognize that behind the Constitution, which we say rests in principles that lie beyond the limits of death and dying, are really man-made legal ctions. This doesn't stop them from being precious or sacred, but we can only stand so much of the sacred or of piety.

We must be able to express our dissent, especially when the members of the bench fail to do so for us.

In reading *Bartleby the Scrivener*, Melville's story, we encounter a contest of wills between the lawyer, a genteel, learned lawyer who is admired by Mr. John Jacob Astor, a representative of the law and thus of order, a man with what de Tocqueville termed certain aristocratic propensities, and poor Bartleby, who owns hardly anything but the clothing on his back. He has been hired to perform

the job of copying legal documents. The lawyer, as boss, is in the habit of sending his other employees to do various errands, but Bartleby replies to each request with a simple phrase, "I prefer not to." It is so unusual, this obstinate negativism, that the lawyer doesn't throw him out, but becomes

locked in a psychological struggle through which he tries to bend Bartleby to his will. In the process he reveals how little he understands of certain basic human attitudes which make the law and the order it imposes quite necessary. Bartleby is never forced or persuaded or cajoled to agree.

In reading the story, one has a sensation of watching a man walking backward past every boundary of human order and desire, saying, “I prefer not to, I prefer not to,” until at last he fades from sight and we are left with only the faint sound of his voice hanging thinly upon the air, still saying no. Bartleby’s last remaining force, the force which at the very last he is asked to give up, is the power of the negative, that capability of language which Kenneth Burke has identi ed as a symbolic agency through which man has separated himself from nature and gone on to establish this complex of human positives which we identify as civilization.

In this view language is a primary agency of order. Why? Because it is the identifying characteristic of a symbol-using, symbol-misusing animal. It is through language that man has separated himself from his natural biologic condition as an animal, but it is through the symbolic capabilities of language that we seek simultaneously to maintain and evade our commitments as social beings. Human society in this regard is ctitious, and it might well be that at this point the legal ctions through which we seek to impose order upon society meet and coincide with the ctions of literature. Perhaps law and literature operate or cooperate, if the term is suitable for an interaction which is far less than implicit; in their respective ways these two symbolic systems work in the interests of social order. The one strives for stability—that is, the law is the law—the other strives to socialize those emotions and interests held in check by manners, conventions and again by law.

“Does not law, like art,” writes Professor Paul Freund, “seek change within the framework of continuity, to bring heresy and

heritage into fruitful tension? They are not dissimilar, and in their resolution, the resolution of passion and pattern, of frenzy and form, of contention and revolt, of order and spontaneity lies the clue to the creativity that will endure.” Given the bits of personal experience which I outlined at the start of this paper, I must both agree and disagree with the professor. He

states the ideal as a writer; with my background, I must state something of the exception. By the way, I always found Justice Holmes and Justice Frankfurter a bit less attractive as human beings than I did as men of scholarly excellence. But then I was always a bit impatient, and something of the cat who was fated to stare at kings.

As one who somehow ts into the profession of Mark Twain, Emerson and Thoreau, I would also remind you that it is precisely the writer's function to yell "Fire" in crowded theaters. We do so, of course, through the form in which we work, and the forms of literature are social forms. We don't always take them seriously, but they are the start of seriousness, and an irreplaceable part of social order.

But if there is one Freund statement with which I could agree wholeheartedly, it is this: "I have likened the Constitution to a work of art in its capacity to respond through interpretation to changing needs, concerns and aspirations." I look upon the Constitution as the still-vital covenant by which Americans of diverse backgrounds, religions, races and interests are bound. They are bound by the principles with which it inspirits us, no less than by the legal apparatus that identi es us as a single American people. The Constitution is a script by which we seek to act out the drama of democracy, and the stage upon which we enact our roles.

Viewed "dramatistically," which is Kenneth Burke's term, we can even suggest that the Declaration of Independence marked the verbalization of our colonial forefathers' intentions of disposing of the king's authority. The Revolutionary War marked the agonistic contest of wills through which the opposing forces were overthrown. The Constitution marked the gloriously optimistic assertion and legitimization of a new form of authority and the proclaiming of a new set of purposes and promises. Upon these

principles, which would be made manifest through the enactment of a new set of democratic hierarchal roles (or identities), the young nation would act. Through the dramatic con ict of democratic society, it would seek to ful ll its revolutionary assertions.

But then came a swift change of direction in which the young nation was forced to recognize that the mere assertion of revolutionary will was not

enough to lead immediately to domestic tranquillity. It brought upon the stage a new alignment of political forces in which the collectivity that had made the Revolution became fragmented. Under the new dispensation the rights of individuals and minorities required protection from the will of the majority. As a new hierarchy began to function, those at its top were in better position to take advantage of these newfound bene ts, while those at the bottom were hardly better o than they had been under the Crown.

Ironically, the nation's recognition of the new problems of its hierarchy was coeval with its increasing concern with its language and linguistic style, which reminds us of the paradox that the revolutionary documents which formed the constitutional grounds of our new system of justice and which set the stage for the enactment of a new democratic drama of human rights were written in the language of the very hierarchy which they had overthrown.

Indeed, the new con ict of interest was foreshadowed in the very process of drawing up the new ground for action out of the English language. Even as the democratic documents of state announced a new corporate purpose, proclaimed a new identity, assigned new roles and aroused new expectations for a redistribution of material resources and authority, a con ict arose between the terms in which revolutionary action had been taken and those in which it would be ful lled.

In drafting the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Je erson had changed the old emotion-charged revolutionary slogan of equality, liberty and property to equality, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. His demands for eternal separation from England and its people were deleted. Also rejected was Je erson's indictment of slavery, in which he overloaded the scapegoat, King George III, with

a malignancy that was all too obviously shared by Americans. There was mysti cation here, if not blatant hypocrisy, because as Katherine Drinker Bowen observed of Je erson's discarded rst draft, "in Je erson's indictment of the King he nowhere states that slavery is a disgrace to America, and should be abolished root and branch by Americans. Instead, he turns his anger on the wrong culprit, twists a shameful fact of American life into an instrument of propaganda against George III, condemns the slave trade,

then draws the sting by putting the blame and responsibility on the King of England."

Ironically, by his extreme eloquence Je erson provided his pro-slavery colleagues an escape from having to undergo the rigors of economic and perhaps spiritual morti cation that would have given full credibility to their proclaimed principles of freedom and equality.

Thus the new edenic political scene incorporated a aw similar to the crack that appeared in the Liberty Bell and embodied a serpentlike malignancy that would tempt government and individual alike to a constantly recurring fall from democratic innocence. With one of its cardinal principles violated, the drama of democratic equality began with its main actors revealing in their noblest gestures "mots vagues" that were at odds with their spoken lines. Indeed, more often than not they ignored the acting script, and being good Americans, they improvised. Portentously, the Founding Fathers' refusal to cleanse themselves was motivated by hierarchical status and economic interests. It was rationalized by the code of social manners that went with their inherited form and manner of speech, their linguistic style. Revolutionary fervor notwithstanding, they were gentlemen, and Je erson's indictment provided these men with the convenient excuse for not violating their private interests and standards of good taste. Thus the glaring transparencies of Je erson's rhetoric a orded them a purely formal escape from the immediate dilemma posed by the con ict between freedom and slavery, and allowed them to use social tact as a tactic of moral evasion.

One result of this evasion was to prove of far-reaching consequence, in that the principles of equality and freedom were splintered into warring entities, thus making for the unheralded emergence of a new principle or motive in the drama of American democracy. That motive or principle—and principles are motives, I will remind you—was race, a motive that would become a source of vast political power and authority, and a major theme in American literature. Though not committed to sacred print, it was to radiate a qualifying in uence upon all of the nation's principles and become the source of a war of words that has continued to this day.

Men like John Adams fought against it, as did Je erson, who himself owned slaves. But because this principle operated in the ethical sphere no less than

in the material world—the principle of equality being a command that all men be treated as equals, while some were obviously being designated unequal on the basis of color and race—it made for a split in America's moral identity that would infuse all of its acts and institutions with a quality of hypocrisy.

Worse, it would fog the American's perception of himself, distort his national image and blind him to the true nature of his cultural complexity.

Later, behind the guise of States' rights, it would explode the issue which led to the Civil War. Thus, even as the English support of the old hierarchical psychosis collapsed, it quickly reasserted itself in the immature and un nished psyche of the new political order. That absentee authority and privilege once vested in kingship now reappeared as the all-too-present authoritarian privilege of those possessing property and high social position. Social order is arduous, and power lters down to the lower levels of society only under constant pressure. Thus new tensions arose, and while the Bill of Rights was enacted to relieve the new imbalance, the manifestations of those rights in the lives of those low in the order of social hierarchy would require time, contention, endless improvisation and many lawyers. As this process ensued, not even the most optimistic citizens found an adequate ful llment of revolutionary expectations. Indeed, these expectations seemed for some to recede before the anguishing complexity of the new social

reality. Instead of domestic tranquillity, Americans discovered that what their bloodshed and sacri ce had actually purchased them was not social perfection, but at best a rm new ground of hope. This was a great deal, but democratic equality remained the promise that would have to be achieved in the vividly imagined but illusory future.

At Philadelphia, the Founding Fathers were presented the eeting opportunity of mounting to the very peak of social possibility a orded by democracy. But after ascending to within a few yards of the summit they paused, nding the view to be one combining splendor with terror. From this height of human aspiration the ethical implications of democratic equality were revealed as tragic, for if there was radiance and glory in the future that stretched so grandly before them, there was also mystery and turbulence

and darkness astir in its depths. Therefore the nal climb would require not only courage, but an acceptance of the tragic nature of their enterprise and the adoption of a tragic attitude that was rendered unacceptable by the optimism developed in revolutionary struggle, no less than by the tempting and virginal richness of the land which was now rendered accessible.

So having climbed so heroically, they descended and laid a foundation for democracy at a less breathtaking altitude, and in justi cation of their failure of nerve before the challenge of the summit, the Founding Fathers committed the sin of American racial pride. They designated one section of the American people to be the sacri cial victims for the bene t of the rest. In failing the test of what was later to be termed the American dilemma, they prepared the way for the evils that Je erson had hoped to pile upon the royal head of England's king, and loaded them upon the black backs of anonymous American slaves. Worse, these Americans were designated as perfect victims for sacri ce, and were placed beyond any possibility of democratic redemption not because of any overt act of social guilt, but simply by virtue of their position in the social hierarchy. Indeed, they were thrust beneath the threshold of social hierarchy and expected to stay there.

To further justify this act of pride and failure of nerve, myths of racial superiority and inferiority were evoked, and endless sacri cial rites of moral evasion were set in motion. These appeared in folktales, jokes and then popular stories—indeed, in some unpopular but quite serious works. Ironically, however, this initial act of pride was to give the Afro-American an inadvertent and unrecognized but crucial role in the nation's drama of conscience. Racism took on the symbolic force of an American form of original sin, and as a man chosen to su er to advance the nation's spiritual and material well-being, the black American was endowed linguistically with an ambivalent power, like that vested in Elizabethan clowns, Christian martyrs and tragic heroes. This is important if we are to understand the prevalence of black gures in our literature.

As a symbol of guilt and redemption, the Negro entered the deepest recesses of the American psyche and became crucially involved in its consciousness, subconsciousness and conscience. He became keeper of the nation's sense of democratic achievement, and the human scale by which

would be measured its painfully slow advance toward true equality. Regardless of the white American's feelings about the economic, psychological and social conditions summed up in the term and symbol "Negro," that term and symbol was now rmly embedded in the operation of the American language. Despite their social powerlessness, Negro Americans were all unwittingly endowed with the vast powers of the linguistic negative, and would now be intricately involved in the use and misuse of a speci c American form of symbolic action, the terminology of democracy. Not only in language, but through language into law and social arrangements, social ethics and manners, into sexuality and city planning or nonplanning, and into art, religion and literature.

In brief, race became a major cause, form and symbol of the American hierarchical psychosis. As the unwilling and unjust personi cation of that psychosis and its major victim, the Afro-American took on the complex symbolism of social health and social sickness. He became the raw labor force, the victim of social degradation, and symbolic of America's hope for future perfection.

He was to be viewed, at least by many whites, as both cause and cure of our social malaise.

This development, of course, contained a lot of mysti cation, for if there was hope for a cure to our condition, it lay in the direction of both white and black men undergoing that agonistic e ort necessary to the ful llment of the nation's commitment to those ethical principles compromised by the Founding Fathers. Until the time that this should come about, race would assert a malignant e ect in areas of national life that were far removed from that of civil rights for black Americans.

It would function as a motive in Melville's *Moby-Dick*, and far beneath the ne prose of Henry James it would goad the consciousness of his characters. It would form the moral core of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, dominate the world of William Faulkner's ction, and would in uence the attitudes of individual

"secessionism" displayed by the heroes of Ernest Hemingway.

Further, the contentions it inspired would hinder the establishment of a national drama, a theater, and account for the dismal stereotypes of popular literature, plays, motion pictures and television dramas, and for their triviality and lack of moral seriousness. What is more, it would lead to the moral negations of the current crop of black lms and to much of what we dislike in rock music.

But here we should pause. Here we will not recapitulate the Civil War. We know to what extent it was a war of words as well as of arms. We know to what extent the black American was involved.

Often, however, the issues of the Civil War and even of blacks appear in novels and other works of literature by other names. For instance, Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* is about the Civil War, but only one black person appears, and then very brie y. It is concerned with the invasion of the private life by warfare, by the army, and by large impersonal social processes, a fact of American democratic life which was becoming a matter of consciousness some thirty years after the Civil War.

We are in a period today when many of the men of my profession complain that American life has gotten out of hand, that it is too

much for the methods and modes of ction. They say that it is too dramatic, that it overwhelms the ctional imagination. I am not so sure about that. I think that the resources are there, and that we have only to seek to use them. But I think something else should be said, since much of the atmosphere of our time is created by major transformations in our way of looking at the law and at the racial aspects of the law, going back to 1954 and up to the measures passed during the sixties.

We went about that with a feeling of good intentions. We sacri ced. We did much to rectify past injustices. But then, with our usual American innocence, we failed to grasp that it was going to cost us something in terms of personal sacri ces and in the rearrangement of the cities and the suburbs. It would cost us something in terms of the sheer acceleration of turmoil and con ict.

And so, we have become a bit tired of this old business.

As a writer, I would remind you, however, that when the Afro-American became symbolic of so many other issues in American life, his increase in freedom acted on the youth at least as a sort of sudden release for which they were unprepared. It was as though the word had gone out that the outsider, the unacceptable, was now acceptable, and young people translated it to mean that all of the repressed psychological drives, all of the discipline of the instincts, were now fair game. “Let it all hang out,” they said. “We have all become black men and women.”

This projection, this identi cation of the socially unacceptable with blacks, must be raised to consciousness. We must be aware of what is going on because only through this will we be able to reassume that optimism so necessary for living and dealing with the many problems of this diverse pluralistic society. Democracy is a collectivity of individuals.

The great writers of the nineteenth century and the best of the twentieth have always reminded us that the business of being an American is an arduous task, as Henry James said, and it requires constant attention to our consciousness and conscientiousness. The law ensures the conditions, the stage upon which we act; the rest of it is up to the individual.

From *American Law: The Third Century*, Fred B. Rothman & Co., 1976.

“A COMPLETION OF PERSONALITY”: A TALK WITH

RALPH ELLISON

Over ve decades Ellison collaborated on numerous interviews, perhaps because he considered the interview an art form. One of his fullest and richest was done with his friend, the writer John Hersey. Part I was published in 1914 as the Introduction to Hersey’s Ralph Ellison: A Collection of Critical Essays. *Part II, in which Ellison comments at length about his novel-in-progress, was conducted in 1982 and published, along with Part I, in* Speaking For You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison, *ed.*

Kimberly W. Pension, Howard University Press, 1987.

I

ONE of the most signi cant views of the work of Ralph Ellison happens to be his own. He is, as he himself says, a slow worker, and over the course of the years, while he was writing away at his second novel—and while Invisible Man *paradoxically refused to drop out of sight—Ellison granted a number of interviews, each of which o ered some telling comments on the situation of a novelist who had been thrust into more gnawing fame than most writers would want in their own time. He reproduced three of the interviews in* Shadow and Act. *Two other valuable ones are noted in the bibliography of this book, and the vivid picture of Ellison by a younger writer, James Alan McPherson, also in this collection, originally included an exchange of letters between the two authors, in which Ellison further elaborated his predicament.*

For predicament it has been, and what is forced upon a reader of these interviews is a sense that the polemic-versus artistic argument—the argument, as old as art itself, over the question: "What use has art?"—

hounds Ellison perhaps more than any other rst-rank novelist of our time, unless it be Alexander Solzhenitsyn. That argument dominates several of the essays in this book, and it hums in harmonic overtones over the rest of them.

It occurred to me as I assembled and read these various views that in the din of this argument we had never had a chance to hear much from Ellison about his attitude toward the actuality of his craft, about the processes of his creative ordeal, about what he thinks actually happens *when he writes, about the deep familial sources of his ways of being and doing, about how his mind works through problems of shape and dream and sound, and about the particular, idiosyncratic inner workings of his art which may have been molded by his existential past. Although it is entitled "The Art of Fiction," not even the* Paris Review *interview, reprinted in* Shadow and Act, *goes /beneath the surface of his struggle to achieve an art worth arguing about as much as his has been.*

And so, on a weekend that Ellison and his wife spent in my home, we talked late into one night about all these matters, and in the cool light of

the next morning we had a conversation in which Ellison, with extraordinary nish and economy, and yet with a fabulist's deceptive randomness, too, synthesized and compressed his views of his labor of choice. Here is what we said:

HERSEY: You were talking about your mother last night, and as you talked I wondered how much she had been a force in moving you toward your calling as a writer, and even in supplying materials that you have drawn on.

ELLISON: She certainly had something to do with encouraging my interest in reading. She had no idea that I was going to become a writer, or if she did, she had more insight into me than I had into myself, because I thought I was going to be a musician. My mother always encouraged me to do *something*, and to be good at it—she insisted upon that.

It was my father who wanted me to be a writer. I didn't discover that until many years later—he died when I was three—until after I had written *Invisible Man* and talked with an older cousin, who told me that my father had used to say, "I'm raising this boy to be a poet." Of course he had given me the name [Ralph Waldo].

But my mother did feed my passion for reading. She brought home books and magazines. My concern with the Picassos and Stravinskys of this world started at an earlier age than usual because she brought home *Vanity Fair*. Here was a world so far from Oklahoma City, in any expected sense, yet it was shaping my sense of what was possible. And she understood that that was what was going on.

And what I did get from my mother was an understanding of people. I was very quick-tempered and impatient, and things began to happen when I reached adolescence; and she would just talk about how people acted, what motives were, and why things were sometimes done. I remember being so outraged by something one of her friends had said that I didn't want to see her or her husband anymore. At thirteen I went to work as the husband's o ce boy, and this close friend of my father was so delighted with having me

around that his childless wife was upset. Her reaction was to spread the word around that she suspected that I was actually her husband's child. Oh,

boy! When the gossip reached me I was outraged—and not only over what it implied about my mother, but because of my love for my father. I had learned to walk at six months and had been his companion from that time until his death, and I was so far from accepting the reality of his death that I was still telling myself that any day he would reappear to take his place as the head of our family. Now I suspect that my fondness for my employer-friend and my vague awareness that he was, in fact, something of a father-gure added to my shock and outrage.

At any rate, when I went to my mother about this matter she proceeded to calm me down. “Well now,” she said, “you should understand what’s happening. You remember your daddy and you’ve been around and seen a few people and have some idea how they act. You’ve been working in drugstores and barbershops and at that o ce and since you’ve been around as much as you have, you must know that she’s crazy. So use your head. She doesn’t have to be put in an institution, but you have to understand and accept the fact that she isn’t responsible.”

It was a shocking notion for me and I didn’t want to surrender my anger, but I realized that my mother was right. What’s more, I realized that often I could save myself a lot of wear and tear with people if I just learned to understand them.

Beyond that, although she was religious, my mother had a great tolerance for the a airs of the world which had nothing to do with religion, and I think that this helped me to sort of balance things out, so to speak. The great emphasis in my school was upon classical music, but such great jazz musicians as “Hot Lips” Page, Jimmy Rushing and Lester Young were living in Oklahoma City, and through her allowing me to attend public dances and to maintain a certain friendship with some of them, even though she watched what I was doing, she made it possible to approach the life of the Negro community there with some sense of its wholeness instead of trying to distort it into some hoped-for, religion-conceived perfection. As it turned out, the perfection, the artistic dedication

which helped me as a writer, was not so much in the classical emphasis as within the jazz itself.

She also helped me to escape the limitations of trying to impose any ingroup class distinctions upon the people of my community.

We were very poor, but my father had been a small businessman who sold ice and coal to both whites and blacks, and since he and my mother were pioneers in a young state, my mother knew some of the city's leaders; they were my father's friends and remained my mother's after his death. She didn't strive to be part of the social leadership of the black community; that was left to the wives of professional men, to teachers and preachers. Her background and attitudes were such that all kinds of people came to the house, or we visited their houses. That was one of the enriching parts of my experience, because I knew people who went right back to the farm and plantation, along with those who had gone to college and medical school. Thus my sense of their stories, lifestyles and so on was never far from my mind. My mother had grown up on a Georgia plantation and was a farm girl; then she left and went to live in Atlanta. This gave me a sense of a past which was far from narrow.

She liked to talk. She never allowed me to lose the vividness of my father, and she told me all kinds of things that he had done—

that he had run away from his own father in South Carolina when he was quite young, had become a professional soldier, and had been in Cuba, the Philippines and China. He was with our troops that fought the Boxer Rebellion. Afterwards, he and his brother had operated a candy kitchen in Chattanooga. He had also operated a restaurant—always trying to get at something—and then had become a construction foreman; that was how they came West to Oklahoma.

There was also her overt and explicit concern with political conditions. There was never a time when I was not aware of what these were all about. When I was in college, my mother broke a segregated-housing ordinance in Oklahoma City; they were throwing her in jail, the NAACP would get her out, and they'd come back and throw her in jail again. This went on until my brother beat up one of the white inspectors; then she decided that it was about

time to get out of that situation before he got himself shot. She had that kind of forthrightness, and I like to think that this was much more valuable than anything literary that she gave me.

HERSEY: The creative drive seems always to have been strong in you, ever since childhood. You said once that you couldn't remember a time when you hadn't wanted to make something—a one-tube radio, a crystal set, a toy. A little later you had an urge to compose music. Where do you think this drive came from?

ELLISON: I don't know where it comes from. Maybe it had something to do with my father's working as a construction foreman, building buildings. It certainly came from some of the boys that I grew up with as a child. They were always *doing* things. I always admired the guys who could make things, who could draw. This was something that gave me a great deal of pleasure.

But maybe the desire to write goes back to a Christmas gift. One Christmas my mother gave me—I must have been ve—a little roll-top desk and a chair, not a swivel chair but a little straight chair, oak, and a little toy typewriter. I had forgotten that. We were living in the parsonage of the old A.M.E. Church, Avery Chapel, which the leaders of the congregation turned over to my mother after the new minister turned out to have his own home. "Why don't you be the janitress of the church and live in the parsonage?" they said. We did, and that's where I got the desk and the little typewriter. I was also given a chemistry set. This might have been unusual in such relatively uneducated families—I think my mother went to the eighth grade in school—but she felt that these were the kinds of things that her boys should have. She was also very explicit, as we grew older, about our economic condition. We knew why we could not have a bicycle, why we could not have this, that or the other.

She explained that we could not have such things because she didn't have the money, and we had to accept that fact. So what did we do?

We learned to do other things. Instead of playing with store-bought toys, you made your own. You shed and hunted, you listened to

music, you danced and you spent a great amount of time reading and dreaming over books.

When Mr. Mead next door taught me the fundamentals of playing an old brass alto horn, my mother bought me a pawnshop cornet.

She could a ord that, and owning the instrument made it possible for me to acquire enough skill to get into the school band. She did what she could, and in addition to encouraging my interest in reading she encouraged my interest in music.

But the desire to make something out of my imagination and to experiment was constant. In one story of mine [“That I Had the Wings” (1943)] there is an incident taken from life, where my brother and I took baby chickens, made little parachutes and got up on top of the chicken house and dropped them down. The lady next door told my mother, and we caught hell for that. We didn’t kill the chickens, understand; we just oated them down. We did this, you see, because we had learned to take iron taps, tie strings to them and then attach the strings to pieces of cloth. When we threw these into the air we’d get a parachute e ect and imagine that the taps were parachutists. We simply took it a step further.

HERSEY: What would you say was the starting point for your new novel?

ELLISON: I guess it started with the idea of an old man being so outraged by his life that he goes poking around in the cellar to nd a forgotten co n, which he had bought years before as insurance against his possible ruin. He discovers that he has lived so long that the co n is full of termites, and that even the things he had stored in the co n have fallen apart. Somehow this said something to my imagination and got me started. You can see that it could go in *any* direction. But then it led to the other idea, which I wrote rst, of a little boy being placed in a co n in a ritual of death and transcendence, celebrated by a Negro evangelist who was unsure whether he was simply exploiting the circus-sideshow shock set o by the sight of a child rising up

out of a co n, or had hit upon an inspired way of presenting the sacred drama of the Resurrection. In

my mind all of this is tied up in some way with the signi cance of being a Negro in America, and at the same time with the problem of our democratic faith as a whole. Anyway, as a product of the imagination it's like a big sponge, maybe, or a waterbed, with a lot of needles sticking in it at various points. You don't know what is being touched, where the needles are going to end up once you get them threaded and penetrated, but somehow I keep trying to tie those threads together and the needle points pressing home without letting whatever lies in the center leak out.

HERSEY: HOW soon after *Invisible Man* was published [1952] did you start working on the new novel?

ELLISON: I was pretty depleted by *Invisible Man*, so I didn't start on another book immediately. I played around with various ideas and spent some time trying to salvage material I had edited out of *Invisible Man*. It was in Rome, during 1956, that I began to think vaguely about this book and conceived the basic situation, which had to do with a political assassination; this was involved with the other patterns—the co n business.

HERSEY: This was before the Kennedys and King were assassinated, of course.

ELLISON: Yes, this was before. Almost eight years before. One of the things which really chilled me—slowed down the writing—was that eruption of assassinations, especially the rst. Because, you see, much of the mood of this book was conceived as comic. Not that the assassination was treated comically, but there is humor involved, and that was rather chilling for me because suddenly life was stepping in and imposing itself upon my ction. Anyway, I managed to keep going with it, I guess because there was nothing else to do. I know that it led me to try to give the book a richer structuring, so that the tragic elements could contain the comic and the comic the tragic, without violating our national pieties—if there are any left.

Americans have always been divided in their pieties, but today there is such a deliberate aunting of the pieties and traditions—of others,

anyway—that it's become di cult to distinguish what is admissible from that which is inadmissible. Even the ag and motherhood are under attack.

HERSEY: With such fast-moving reality so close at hand, how much in control of your ctional characters can you feel that you are?

ELLISON: Once a logic is set up for a character, once he begins to move, then that which is implicit within him tends to realize itself, and for you to discover the *form* of the ction, you have to go where he takes you and follow him. In the process you change your ideas.

You remember, Dostoevski wrote about eight versions of a certain scene in *The Brothers Karamazov,* and in some instances the original incidents were retained but the characters who performed them were changed. I nd that happens with me. I get to the point where something has to be done, and discover that it isn't logical for the character who started out to do it, to act this way; then suddenly another character pops up. In this book there is an instance wherein McIntyre has to interview the man who burns his Cadillac. This man is being held in the observation cell of a hospital because the authorities believe that a Negro who burns his own Cadillac has to be crazy. For McIntyre to see the man there has to be an intermediary, so suddenly I found myself dealing with a new character, a Negro employed by the hospital, who gets McIntyre past the barriers to the car burner. This fellow wasn't foreseen; he simply appeared to help me get on with the form.

HERSEY: About motive—what gives you the psychic energy to take on a massive work and keep at it for a very long time?

ELLISON: I guess it is the writing itself. I am terribly stubborn, and once I get engaged in that kind of project, I just have to keep going until I nally make something out of it. I don't know what the something is going to be, but the process is one through which I make a good part of my own experience meaningful. I don't mean in any easy autobiographical sense, but in the matter of drawing actual experience, thought and emotion together in a way that creates an

artifact through which I can reach other people. Maybe that's vanity; I don't know. Still, I believe that ction does help create value, and I regard this as a very serious—I almost said "sacred"—

function of the writer.

Psychic energy? I don't know; I think of myself as kind of lazy.

Yet I do nd that working slowly, which is the only way I seem able to work —although I write fast much of the time—the problem is one of being able to receive from my work that sense of tension and of high purpose being realized that keeps me going. This is a crazy area that I don't understand; none of the Freudian explanations seem adequate.

HERSEY: AS to the short range, you used a phrase last night that interested me. You said you wanted to keep the early morning free

"in case the night before had generated something that could be put to good use." What did you mean by that?

ELLISON: I never know quite what has gone on in my subconscious in the night. I dream vividly, and all kinds of things happen, but by morning they have fallen below the threshold again. But I like to feel that whatever takes place becomes active in some way in what I do at the typewriter. In other words, I believe that a human being's life is of a whole, and that he lives the full twenty-four hours. If he is a writer or an artist, what happens during the night feeds back in some way into what he does consciously during the day —that is, when he is doing that which is self-achieving, so to speak. Part of the pleasure of writing, as well as the pain, is involved in pouring into that thing which is being created all of what he cannot understand, cannot say, cannot deal with or cannot even admit in any other way. The artifact is a completion of personality.

HERSEY: DO you experience anything like daydreaming or dreaming when you are writing? Do you feel that the writing process may involve a somewhat altered state of consciousness in itself?

ELLISON: I think a writer learns to be as conscious about his craft as he can possibly be—not because this will make him absolutely lucid

about what he does, but because it prepares the stage for structuring his daydreaming, and allows him to draw upon the various irrational elements involved in writing. You know that when you begin to structure literary forms you are going to have to play variations on your themes, and you are going to have to make everything vivid, so that the reader can see, hear, feel, smell and, if you're lucky, even taste. All that is on a conscious level and very important. But then, once you get going, strange things occur. There are things in *Invisible Man*, for instance, that I can't *imagine* my having consciously planned. They materialized as I worked consciously at other things. Take three of the speeches: the speech made at the eviction, the funeral address in Mount Morris Park, and the one that Barbee made in chapel. I realized consciously, or I *discovered* as I wrote, that I was playing variations on what Otto Rank identi ed as the myth of the birth and death of the hero. So in the rewriting, that conscious knowledge, that insight, made it possible to come back and add elements to the design which I had written myself into under the passion of telling a story.

What should also be said in this connection is that somewhere—it doesn't have to be right in the front of the mind, of the consciousness—writers, like other artists, are involved in a process of comparative culture. I looked at that copy of *The Lower Depths* on the table there this morning, and I remembered how much of Gorki I had read, and how I was always not putting his characters into blackface, but nding equivalents for the experience he depicted; the equivalents for turns of phrase, for parables and proverbs, which existed within the various backgrounds that I knew. I think that something like that goes on when a conscious writer goes about creating a ction. It's part of his workshop, his possession of the culture of the form in which he works.

HERSEY: YOU once said that it took you a long time to learn how to adapt myth and ritual into your work. Faulkner speaks of a "lumber room in the subconscious," where old things are kept. How do you get at the sources of these things deep down in your mind?

ELLISON: I think I get at them through sheer work, converting incidents into patterns—and also by simply continuing at a thing when I don't seem to be getting anywhere. For instance, I wrote a scene in which Hickman is thinking about the di culty of communicating with someone as constituting a "wall"; he thinks this as he is drifting o to sleep. Well, later in my work I suddenly realized that this damn wall had turned up again in another form.

That's when that voice in my unconscious nally said, "Hey, *this* is what you've been getting at." Looking back, I saw that I had worked up a little pattern with these walls. What the unconscious mind does is to put all manner of things into juxtaposition. The conscious mind has to provide the logical structure of narrative and incident through which these unconscious patterns can be allowed to radiate by throwing them into artful juxtaposition on the page.

HERSEY: DO you, as some writers do, have a sense of standing in a magic circle when you write?

ELLISON: To the extent that unexpected things occur, that characters say or see things which, for all my attempts to be conscious and to work out of what I call a conceptual outline, are suddenly just *there*.

That *is* magical, because such things seem to emerge out of the empty air. Yet you know that somehow the dreams, emotions, ironies and hidden implications of your material often nd ways of making themselves manifest. You work to make them reveal themselves.

HERSEY: When you are writing, do you sometimes nd yourself so totally engaged by a character that you are carried away outside yourself by *his* feelings—are literally beside yourself?

ELLISON: I nd myself carried away and emotionally moved, sometimes quite unexpectedly, and my tendency is to distrust it, feeling that perhaps I'm being sentimental, being caught in a situation which I am not adequately transforming into art. So I put it aside and wait awhile, maybe months, and then go back, and if it still works after I've examined it as well as I can, as objectively as I

can, then I perhaps read it to Fanny, and if she doesn't indicate that it's slobbering sentimentality, in bad taste or just poorly achieved, then I leave it in.

HERSEY: Would you say that by and large when you have had these surges of feeling the writing does hold up in the long run?

ELLISON: Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't. I won't be able to say about this book until it has been read by enough objective readers. I won't be able to judge until then because it has some crazy developments.

I found myself writing a scene in which Hickman and Wilhite, his deacon, go into a strange house in Washington, and nd a bunch of people in the hallway who are upset because the police won't tell them what has happened in the apartment of one of their neighbors.

Then one of the women gets hysterical, and pretty soon she's outraging the crowd by talking about the most personal matters as she addresses herself to a bewildered Wilhite and Hickman. Not only was I shocked to discover myself writing this unplanned scene, but I still have questions about how it functions. Yet for all its wild, tragicomic emotion—there it is! Now, when your material takes over like that, you are really being pushed. Thus, when this woman started confessing, she forced *me* to think about Hickman's role as minister on a di erent level; I mean on the theological level, which was something I hadn't planned, since I wasn't writing an essay but a novel. Finally Hickman came to my aid by recognizing that the woman had been unfolding a distorted and highly personalized dream-version of the immaculate birth. To me she sounded merely irrational and comic, but Hickman, being a minister, forced himself to look beneath her raving, even though she is without question a most unacceptable surrogate for the Virgin. After that, I was forced to realize that this crazy development was really tied in with the central situation of the novel: that of an old man searching throughout the years for a little boy who ran away. So I guess it sprang from that magic circle you referred to, from that amorphous level which lies somewhere between the emotions and the intellect,

between the consciousness and the unconscious, which supports our creative powers but which we cannot control.

HERSEY: I have wondered about the ways in which your musical experience has fed into your writing.

ELLISON: My basic sense of artistic form is musical. As a boy I tried to write songs, marches, exercises in symphonic form, really before I received any training, and then I studied. I listened constantly to music, trying to learn the processes of developing a theme, of expanding and contracting and turning it inside out, of making bridges, working with techniques of musical continuity, and so on. I think that basically my instinctive approach to writing is through *sound*. A change of mood and mode comes to me in terms of sound.

That's one part of it, in the sense of composing the architecture of a ction.

On the other hand, one of the things I work for is to make a line of prose *sound* right, or for a bit of dialogue to fall on the page in the way I hear it, aurally, in my mind. The same goes for the sound and intonation of a character's voice. When I am writing of characters who speak in the Negro idiom, in the vernacular, it is still a real problem for me to make their accents fall in the proper place in the visual line.

HERSEY: Which comes rst for you in writing, hearing or seeing?

ELLISON: I might conceive of a thing aurally, but to realize it you have to make it vivid. The two things must operate together. What is the old phrase —"the planned dislocation of the senses"? That *is* the condition of ction, I think. Here is where sound becomes sight and sight becomes sound, and where sign becomes symbol and symbol becomes sign; where fact and idea must not just be hanging there but must become a functioning part of the total design, involving itself in the reader as idea as well as drama. You do this by providing the reader with as much detail as is possible in terms of the visual *and* the aural *and* the rhythmic—to allow him to involve himself, to attach himself, and then begin to collaborate in the

creation of the ctional spell. Because you simply cannot put it all there on the page; you can only evoke it—or evoke what is already there implicitly in the reader's head, his sense of life.

HERSEY: YOU mentioned “making bridges” a minute ago. I remember that you once said that your anxiety about transitions greatly prolonged the writing of *Invisible Man*.

ELLISON: Yes, that has continued to be something of a problem. I try to tell myself that it is irrational, but it is what happens when you’re making something and you know that you are *making* something rather than simply relating an anecdote that actually happened. But at the same time you have to strike a balance between that which you can imply and that which you must make explicit, so that the reader can follow you. One source of this anxiety comes, I think, from my sense of the variations in American backgrounds, especially as imposed by the racial situation. I can’t always be certain that what I write is going to be understood. This doesn’t mean that I am writing for whites, but that I realize that as an American writer I have a problem of communicating across our various social divisions, whether of race, class, education, region or religion—and much of this holds true even within my own racial group. It’s dangerous to take things for granted.

This reminds me of something that happened out at a northwestern university. A young white professor said to me, “Mr.

Ellison, how does it feel to be able to go to places where most Negroes can’t go?” Before I could think to be polite I answered,

“What you mean is: ’How does it feel to be able to go places where most *white* men can’t go?” He was shocked and turned red, and I was embarrassed; nevertheless, it was a teaching situation, so I told him the truth. I wanted him to understand that individuality is still operative beyond the racial structuring of American society, and that, conversely, there are many areas of black society that are closed to *me* while open to certain whites. Friendship and shared interests make the di erence.

When you are writing ction out of your individual sense of American life, it’s di cult to know what to take for granted. For instance, I don’t know whether I can simply refer to an element of decor and communicate the social values it stands for, because so much depends upon the way a reader makes associations. I am more con dent in such matters than I was when writing *Invisible Man,* but for such an allusion—say, to a certain type of

chair or vase or painting—to function, the reader must not be allowed to limit his understanding of what is implied simply because the experience you are presenting is, in its immediate sense, that of a black person. The writer must be aware that the reality of race conceals a complex of manners and culture, because such matters in uence the shaping of ctional form, to a large extent govern the writer's sense of proportion, and determine what he feels obligated to render as well as what he feels he can simply imply.

I had to learn, for instance, that in dramatic scenes, if you get the reader going along with your own rhythm, you can omit any number of explanations. You can leave great gaps because in his sense of urgency the reader will say, "Hell, don't waste time telling me how many steps he walked to get there, I want to know what he *did once he* got there!" An ellipsis is possible and the reader will ll in the gap.

Still, I have uncertainty about some of the things I'm doing, especially when I'm using more than one main voice, and with a time scheme that is much more fragmented than in *Invisible Man*.

There I was using a more tidy dramatic form. This novel is dramatic within its incidents, but it moves back and forth in time. In such a case I guess an act of faith is necessary, a faith that if what you are writing is of social and artistic importance and its diverse parts are presented vividly in the light of its overall conception, and if you *render* the story rather than just tell it, then the reader will go along.

That's a lot of "ifs," but if you can involve him in the process his reading becomes a pleasurable act of discovery.

HERSEY: DO you have in mind an image of some actualized reader to whom you are communicating as you write?

ELLISON: There is no *speci c* person there, but there is a sort of ideal reader, or informed persona, who has some immediate sense of the material that I'm working with. Beyond that there is my sense of the rhetorical levers within American society, and these attach to all kinds of experiences and values. I don't want to be a behaviorist here, but I'm referring to the systems of values, beliefs, customs, sense of the past, and that hope for the

future which have evolved through the history of the Republic. These do provide a medium of communication.

For instance, the old underdog pattern turns up in many guises, and it allows the writer to communicate with the public over and beyond whatever the immediate issues of his ction happen to be.

That is, deep down we believe in the underdog, even though we give him hell, and this provides a rhetoric through which the writer can communicate with a reader beyond any questions of their disagreements over class values, race or anything else. But the writer must be aware that this is what is there. At the same time, I do not think he can manipulate his readers too directly; it must be an oblique process, if for no other reason than that to do it too directly throws you into propaganda, as against that brooding, questioning stance that is necessary for ction.

HERSEY: HOW do literary in uences make themselves felt concretely in your work? You have spoken often of Joyce, Eliot, Dostoevski, Hemingway, Stein, Malraux and others as having in uenced you early. How do the in uences manifest themselves? How have you transformed them for your own ends?

ELLISON: It is best, of course, when they don’t show themselves directly, but they are there in many ways. Joyce and Eliot, for instance, made me aware of the playful possibilities of language.

You look at a page of *Finnegans Wake* and see references to all sorts of American popular music; yet the context gives it an extension from the popular back to the classical and beyond. This is just something that Joyce teaches you that you can do, and you can abstract the process and apply it to a frame of reference which is

American and historical; it can refer to class, to the fractions and frictions of color, to popular and folk culture—it can do many things.

A writer makes himself present in your work through allowing you to focus upon certain aspects of experience. Malraux’s concern with the individual caught up consciously in a historical, a revolutionary situation provided

insights which allowed me to understand certain possibilities in the ctional material around me.

From him I learned that the condition of that type of individual is essentially the same, regardless of his culture or the political climate in which he nds his existence.

Or again, some writers—say, Dostoevski, or even Tolstoy—will make you very much aware of what is possible in depicting a society in which class lines either are uid or have broken down without the cultural style and values on either extreme of society being dissipated. From such writers you learn to explore the rich ctional possibilities to be achieved in juxtaposing the peasant's consciousness with that of the aristocrat and the aristocrat's with the peasant's.

This insight is useful when you are dealing with American society.

For years white people went through Grand Central Station having their luggage carried by Ph.D.'s. They couldn't see the Ph.D.'s because their race and class attitudes had trained them to see only the uniforms and the dark faces, but the Ph.D.'s could see them and judge them on any number of levels. This makes for drama, and it is a drama which goes right to the core of the democratic faith. So you get your moral perception of the contradictions of American class and personality from such literature—even more, perhaps, than from psychiatry or sociology, because such novelists have always dealt with the drama of social living.

HERSEY: YOU once had some very interesting things to say about the similarities and di erences of the stances of black and Jewish writers in this country. It seems clear that Russian novelists have had a special kind of access to the deeper resources we were talking about earlier, access to primary feelings. Do you think there are

particular ways in which Negro writers have had a corresponding access to those deeper resources—di erent in kind or degree from that of the Jewish writer, or the white Protestant writer in America, say, or the Russian writer or the English writer?

ELLISON: You will have to be very careful about that, because writers are individuals, each unique in his own way. But I would think that the access to primary feelings that the great Russian novelists had grew out of the nature of their society and the extreme disruption of hierarchal relationships which occurred during the nineteenth century. Then you had a great declassed aristocracy, with the Tsar still at the top and an awakening peasantry at the bottom. On one hand, society was plunging headlong into chaos, and on the other there was a growing identi cation on the part of many declassed aristocrats with the peasantry, an identi cation across traditional hierarchal divisions which was sustained by the unifying force of Russian Greek Orthodox Christianity. The friction generated by these social unities and divisions in that chaotic scene made possible all kinds of intensities of emotion and aggravations of sensibility.

The belief in the Tsar as a sacred “Little Father” remained a unifying force, but was no longer strong enough to rationalize and impose order upon the expression of primary emotions—class hate, greed, ambition, and so on. Such disruption of the traditional ordering of society, as in our own country since 1954, made for an atmosphere of irrationality, and this created a situation of unrestrained expressiveness. Eyeballs were peeled, nerves were laid bare, and private sensibilities were subjected to public laceration. In fact, life became so theatrical (not to say nightmarish) that even Dostoevski’s smoking imagination was barely able to keep a step ahead of what was actually happening in the garrets and streets. Today, here in the United States, we have something similar, but there’s no point in my trying to explain Russian extremism, or the genius of the great nineteenth-century Russian novelists. Not even Dostoevski was able to do that.

Anyway, for all its expressiveness and chaos, the Negro American situation is something else, both in degree and source. Except for

the brief period of Reconstruction, when we helped create the new constitutions of the Southern states and attempted to restructure society so as to provide a more equal set of relationships between the classes and races, we were *below* the threshold of social hierarchy. Our social mobility was strictly and violently limited, and in a way that neither our Christianity nor belief in the principles of the Constitution could change. As the

sociologists say, we were indeed disadvantaged, both by law and by custom. Yet our actual position was ambiguous, for although we were outside the social compact, we were existentially right in the middle of the social drama. I mean that as servants we were right in the bedroom, so to speak. Thus we saw things, and we understood the di erence between ideal assertions and crude realities. Much of the rhetorical and political energy of white society went toward proving to itself that we were not human and that we had no sense of the re nement of human values. But this in itself pressured you, motivated you, to make even ner distinctions, both as to personality and value. You *had* to, because your life depended upon it and your sense of your own humanity demanded that you do so. You had to identify those values which were human and preserving of your life and interests, as against those which were inhuman and destructive. So we were thrown upon our own resources and sense of life. We were forced to de ne and act out our own idea of the heights and depths of the human condition. Human beings cannot live in a situation where violence can be visited upon them without any concern for justice—

and in many instances without possibility of redress—without developing a very intense sense of the precariousness of all human life, not to mention the frailty and arbitrariness of human institutions. So you were forced to be existential in your outlook, and this gives a poignancy and added value to little things and you discover the value of modes and attitudes that are rejected by the larger society. It also makes you terribly brutal and thick-skinned toward some values, while ultrasensitive to others.

Now, this background provides the black writer with much to write about. As ctional material it rivals that of the nineteenth-century Russians. But to the extent that other American writers,

writers of di erent backgrounds, understand this material, or can implicate it in their own experience, they too have a way into what is currently known as “the black experience”—which I prefer to call

“the *Negro* American experience”—because for it to be worthy of ctional treatment, worthy of art, it has to be meaningful to others who do not share in its immediacy. I’ll add that since it is both my own and an irrevocable

part of the basic experience of the United States, *I* think that it is not only worthy, but indispensable to any profoundly *American* depiction of reality.

To repeat myself, this society has structured itself to be unaware of what it owes in both the positive and negative sense to the condition of inhumanity that it has imposed upon a great mass of its citizens. The fact that many whites refuse to recognize this is responsible for much of the anger erupting among young blacks today. It makes them furious when whites respond to their complaints with, “Yes, but *I* had nothing to do with any of that,” or reply to their demands for equal opportunity in a racially rigged society, “We’re against a quota system because *we* made it on our individual merits”—because this not only sidesteps a pressing reality, but is only partially true. Perhaps they *did* make it on their own, but if that’s true the way was made easier because their parents did not have to contend with *my* parents, who were ruled out of the competition. They had their troubles too, but the relative benevolence of democracy shared by their parents, and now by them, was paid for by *somebody* other than themselves, and was being paid long before many of them arrived on these shores. *We* know that as the nation’s unwilling scapegoat we paid for much of it. Nor is this knowledge a matter of saying, “Pay us o ,” or saying, in the words of the old joke, “Your granddaddy kicked my granddaddy a hundred years ago, so now I’ve come to collect the debt—bend over.” That’s not the point. The point is one of moral perception, the perception of the wholeness of American life and the cost of its successes and its failures. What makes for a great deal of black fury is the refusal of many Americans to understand that somebody paid for the nation’s peace and prosperity in terms of blood and frustrated dreams, that somebody now denied his proper

share helped convert raw materials into sophisticated gadgetry. I don’t mean to imply that only the blacks did this; the poor Southern whites, the Irish, numbers of peoples also did. They too underwent the crudities and inequities of democracy so that the high rhetoric could retain some resonance of possibility and truth.

HERSEY: HOW much is anger a motive force for novelists of all kinds?

Does the artist start with anger more than with other emotions?

ELLISON: I don’t think that he necessarily starts with anger. Indeed, anger can get in the way, as it does for a ghter. If the writer starts with anger, then if he is truly writing he immediately translates it through his craft into consciousness, and thus into understanding, insight and perception. Perhaps that’s where the morality of ction lies. You see a situation which outrages you, but as you write about the characters who embody that which outrages, your sense of craft and the moral role of your craft demands that you depict those characters in the breadth of their humanity. You try to give them the density of the human rather than the narrow intensity of the demonic. This means that you try to delineate them as men and women who possess feelings and ideals, no matter how much you reject their feelings and ideals. Anyway, I nd this happening in my own work; it humanizes *me*. The main motive is not to express raw anger, but to present, as sentimental as it might sound, the wonder of life in the fullness of which all these outrageous things occur.

HERSEY: Have you felt some de ance of death as a writer, in the sense that what you are making may possibly circumvent death?

ELLISON: No, I dare not. *(He laughs)* No, you just write for your own time, while trying to write in terms of the density of experience, knowing perfectly well that life repeats itself. Even in this rapidly changing United States it repeats itself. The mystery is that while repeating itself it always manages slightly to change its mask. To be able to grasp a little of that change within continuity and to communicate it across all these divisions of background and individual experience seems enough for me. If you’re lucky, of

course, if you splice into one of the deeper currents of life, then you have a chance of having your work last a little bit longer.

II

Ellison and I resumed this conversation some time later in Key West, where he and I are o -and-on next-door neighbors in small “conch”

houses. This time I began asking him to tell me about his formative years.

HERSEY: Could we talk a bit about your edgling years in writing?

Would you talk about how you got started?

ELLISON: Well, it was kind of play at rst. I had begun to read Eliot, Pound, Hemingway and others—I think I read my rst Hemingway in *Esquire* in barbershops in my home city, but it was Eliot's *Waste Land*, with its footnotes, that made me become fascinated with how writing was written. I always read a lot; I took a course in the nineteenth-century English novel at Tuskegee.

HERSEY: Who put *The Waste Land* in your way?

ELLISON: It was in the library at Tuskegee—a good library, even though it wasn't enough used. In fact, you could nd most of the anthropological and geological references in that library. I worked in the library one year, just prowling the stacks and reading. No one taught Eliot there. I think I got one professor interested in that area, a good man with a very good mind.

HERSEY: You've told me in the past about Richard Wright's taking you under his wing when you moved to New York. When did you meet him?

ELLISON: When I got to New York I happened to see a copy of the *New Masses*, which had a poem by Wright. I was interested because I did not see the techniques of modern poetry in the work of Afro-American poets. I happened to meet Langston Hughes the rst morning that I was in New York. Staying at the Harlem Annex of the YMCA, I went across the street to get breakfast, and there he was

talking with Alain Locke, who was a professor of philosophy at Howard, one of the theorists of the Negro Renaissance. I had read Locke's work, and had met him a few weeks before, when he had been at Tuskegee to visit Hazel Harrison. So I reintroduced myself to him, and he introduced me to Hughes. Hughes put me to work immediately to return some books to the library. They happened to be Malraux's *Days of Wrath* and *Man's Fate*. He said, "You can read these before you return them if you like," and of course I read them.

I had read some Marxism even at Tuskegee—that, too, was in the library! I was quite excited by these books of Malraux's, and I asked Hughes if he knew a Negro writer by the name of Wright. He said,

"Yes, he'll be here next week," and he dropped Wright a card. W

hen Wright got to New York, he sent me a card telling me where I could meet him. We hit it o because I was, I guess, one of the few Afro-Americans at that point who could talk about writing. At that time I had no thought of becoming a writer myself; my world was music. I had tried to write some poetry at Tuskegee, but just for myself, just playing around with it. One poem was published; my rst publication was a poem, which I wrote after a friend of mine died. He hadn't attended Tuskegee but had gone to some other university, and coming home he had had an attack of appendicitis; they wouldn't accept him at a white hospital, and peritonitis had set in.

One of Wright's reasons for coming to New York was to work in the Harlem bureau of *The Daily Worker* and to edit a magazine which they were trying to resuscitate. It had been called *Challenge* during the Harlem Renaissance; now they called it *New Challenge*.

He was editing this with two women, and he wanted a book review, so I wrote my rst book review—not a very good one. I later reviewed the same book for the *Times*, and I think I did a *little* better. Then as he planned his next issue, he didn't have any short ction, and he asked me to write a story. I said, "I don't know anything about writing a story." He said, "You talk well about stories. Why don't you try? You've had some experiences." I had ridden freight trains, so I wrote a story about an incident occurring

on a hobo trip and he accepted it. I still have the galleys somewhere. The magazine folded—the girls didn't get along—but by that time, I was hooked. I began to write little stories and the *New Masses* published them; then I began to write book reviews for them. In some of the issues I wrote most of the unsigned reviews.

They encouraged me. Some of the people there didn't particularly care for Wright. I guess he was rising too fast. They told me, "Oh, you're going to

be a better writer than he is.” I said, “You’re crazy,”

and let it go, but I kept writing.

There’s something of a misunderstanding about Wright and my ction. I met him in 1937 and I was writing a lot of ction, but I approached writing as I approached music. I’d been playing since I was eight years old, and I knew you didn’t reach a capable performance in any craft without *work*. I’d play one set of scales over and over again. In Tuskegee I’d get up early in the morning—

this was required of brass instrument players—and blow sustained tones for an hour. I knew other students used to hate it, but this developed embouchure, breath control, and so on. I approached writing in the same way. I wrote a hell of a lot of stu that I didn’t submit to anybody. At rst I showed some of my things to Wright, and then by 1940 I wrote a story which had to do with some ght that broke out between a chef and a hallboy in a club, basing it upon a club where I had worked in Oklahoma City—I’d worked there as a bread-and-butter boy and then as an extra waiter—and I showed this to Dick, and he kept it and kept it and didn’t say anything. I let a few weeks go by and then nally said, “Well, what *about* it? What *about* it?” And he answered, “This is *my* stu .” And I said, “Okay, but what do you expect? I thought I was taking your advice.” After that I never showed him another piece of ction.

HERSEY: What kind of advice had he been giving you?

ELLISON: Well, he’d suggest how to tighten, that kind of thing. He did not have the kind of experience I’d had and was not familiar with it, but generally he gave me suggestions on structure. I was struggling with the problem of how to render Afro-American speech without

resorting to misspellings—to give a *suggestion* of the idiom. Of course I had a musician’s ear, and I kept working with that. Some of the rst things were embarrassing. You go from something that you’ve read until you nd out how *you* really feel about it. But after 1940 I’d show him some of my essays and book reviews, and often he felt that I had too many ideas in the pieces. I told myself, “Well, there may be too many ideas, but I guess the

real problem is in articulating them," because by then I was reading a hell of a lot of Malraux, and I knew that I didn't have enough ideas to cause confusion; it was a matter of writing with clarity. So I kept working for that. I started to come in contact with writer-intellectuals in New York—on the [New York Federal] Writers Project, and because Wright introduced me to people in the League of American Writers.

I began to meet people. They were so available during those days!

You know, you began to *measure* yourself. In trying to learn something I talked to well-known Afro-American writers, and I found that they did not know consciously what was going on in literature. I could not discuss technique with them, and even though we shared some points of ideology, because a number of them were leftists, they couldn't talk to me about technical matters.

HERSEY: Who might some of them have been?

ELLISON: Well, Hughes was one, Claude McKay was another, and there were lesser writers, some newspapermen. But they were all on the Project. Some of the stu I worked on back then has recently been published.

HERSEY: What sorts of things did you do with the Project?

ELLISON: I did several things, but the main thing was a book to be titled *Negroes in New York*. When I got into the research, I realized I was dealing with American history. It was an education in itself. I also worked on a projected book of folklore—B. A. Botkin was at the top somewhere, though I didn't work directly under him; I collected kids' rhymes, game songs and so on, but I'd take the opportunity to question old people and get them to tell me stories. It was a rich

harvest, just tremendous, and it t right into some of the things I was reading. By this time I was rereading Mark Twain, and I'd started reading Henry James. It was in this kind of thing where Wright was important. He introduced me to the Henry James prefaces, which were edited by Dick Blackmur. I used to repunctuate James's prose so that I could get the most out of it. I had to teach myself to read him. I was also reading Conrad's

essays, and any writer who wrote about the craft—the Goncourt brothers, the Russians. I was also reading essays on the cinema by Eisenstein and Pudovkin. I would collect old copies of *Hound and Horn* and of *International Literature*. I had a hell of a lot of Gorki's works, and the pamphlets on literature which were published by the Communists. I was reading *Partisan Review*, even though I disagreed with the politics. Hell, I could read Eliot in the *Partisan Review;* I used to say,

"I wonder why these guys are publishing people whose politics disagree with theirs." But I was glad that they did, because what Eliot had to say was far more interesting than what Philip Rahv had to say.

HERSEY: There is one other thing about those early days I'd like to explore with you. In my previous interview with you, we talked about family in uences, and you told me how your mother and your father had helped to shape what you have become. You've often talked about Fanny's role in your literary life. Would you talk about that a little? She must have come into your life at about that time.

ELLISON: As I said in the introduction to the thirtieth-anniversary edition of *Invisible Man*, when I met Fanny she had a steady job. I had been working on the *Negro Quarterly*, and sometimes you got paid and sometimes you didn't. Angelo Herndon had set up the *Negro Quarterly* and wanted someone who was familiar with literature to work with him. I was doing well on the Writers Project; it wasn't much money, but it *came* on payday. Finally I said, "All right, Angelo, if you'll pay me what I make on the Writers Project, I'll come there." I'd gone on the Project in 1938, and this was 1942,

and of course the money was not always there. I guess I should say that I had been married once before.

HERSEY: Yes, I know.

ELLISON: By the time I met Fanny I was going to sea—in 1944. She worked for the Urban League. Of course I had money from my voyages; you got a bonus whenever you went into the war zone.

That was ne, but by the time we were married in 1944, the war was still on and I was going to sea. In 1945, I started *Invisible Man*. I had come back from the sea and had no job. She was working. I began building high-delity ampli ers and installing sound systems with a friend of mine who knew more about such things than I did. I took photographs, sold a few pieces, and so on. But the main—and secure— nancial support was Fanny. Beyond that, she would read the damn stu , type it and correct the spelling! We laugh now, because I've become a much better speller just by giving my attention to it.

HERSEY: Does she still help in these ways?

ELLISON: She still types nal drafts; I type my rough stu . I read aloud to her over and over again.

HERSEY: DO her responses make a di erence to you?

ELLISON: Yes, they do, very de nitely. I don't always agree, because in an oral reading you don't always get the nuances or visual rhythm. But she knows quite a bit. Fanny studied drama and speech at the University of Iowa, so she's had her training. She directed a little in Chicago before she was married. I think one of the reasons we became attracted to each other was that we both liked books.

We combined our libraries. One of the things which always struck me is that we both had the same copy of the magazine *Vanity Fair* which we'd kept; it had a cover with a Balinese woman by Covarrubias. I'd begun reading *Vanity Fair* when I was a kid; when I was able to I'd buy it. What you were exposed to in the magazine was the avant-garde. I was familiar with names that didn't turn up

in college courses until many years later—even at Harvard! That's what I mean when I speak of "free-oating educational possibilities." If you're attuned, the stu is there.

HERSEY: And then, of course, in 1952 you published *Invisible Man*, and everything must have changed in your life; all your relationships must have

changed. What about your relationship with your former mentor, Wright, for instance?

ELLISON: Dick and I remained friends, although of course we had not been so close after he had gone to live in Paris. Fanny and I went over to Europe rst in 1954, when I lectured at the Salzburg Seminars; then in 1955 when we went to Rome we stopped in Paris and saw him. Then I think I saw him again in 1956 when I went to Mexico for a conference and went to see him as we passed through.

There was some correspondence; a lot of the letters are in the collection at Yale. Our relationship changed, of course. After all, I had read all kinds of books most of my life, and Wright was self-taught, without even any structured instruction.

HERSEY: More than thirty years have passed since *Invisible Man*.

You've grown and changed. America has changed. How will the big book you've been working on all this time di er in tone and purpose and method from *Invisible Man?*

ELLISON: *Invisible Man* took on its own life, and has more or less gone its own way. I am identi ed with it, but I haven't read the book in years and years. I've read sections. It's out there, and I certainly appreciate the fact that it lives. But the main thing is to make a rounded form out of the material I'm dealing with *now*. The book uses comic e ects; maybe ultimately what I write always turns out to be tragicomedy, which I think has proved to be the underlying mode of American experience. We don't remember enough; we don't allow ourselves to remember events, and I suppose this helps us to continue our belief in progress. But the undercurrents are always there. You and I were speaking the other day about how we turn our eyes away from the role that religion has continued to play in

American life. It has re-emerged recently as a potent and in some ways dangerous force, and it has taken on danger because we were not paying attention to its signi cance in all those earlier years. This is not just to take a negative view of it. Negro religion has been a counterbalance to much of

the inequality and imposed chaos which has been the American Negro experience. When Martin Luther King, Jr., emerged as an important American gure, it was an instance of the church making itself visible in the political and social life and ful lling its role in the realm of morality. The kinds of things which are involved in this book seem to have grown out of what has been happening all along.

HERSEY: The religious element in these intervening years operates in the book, then?

ELLISON: Yes. I guess that in all my work there is an undergrounding of American history as it comes to focus in the racial situation. One of the characters is a Negro minister who was once a jazz trombonist, and he underwent an experience which turned him from his wild life as a musician into a serious minister, but one who also brought with him his experience as a showman. He isn't always sure when he's using religious methods, even though his motives are religious, or when he's allowing the devices of his old past to intrude.

HERSEY: Is this a metaphor for the tour of Ralph Ellison from jazz musician to another kind of performer in the moral realm?

ELLISON: No, I don't think of it that way. So much of American life evolves around the dedication toward a religious outlook, but religion always runs into the limitations of politics. Many of our politicians were ministers. We had a recent instance of a Catholic priest, Father Drinan, who had to be ordered out of Congress by Rome. This book was conceived before Martin Luther King became such a gure, but he too had to enter the realm of politics while trying to stay outside it. When he began to connect the struggle for racial justice with Vietnam, he made himself vulnerable; that might

well have played a role in his being killed. This fellow Hickman developed, as I worked on the book, from a musician who adopted the more folkish ways of ministers into something fairly sophisticated. He was always capable with words. He was the son of a preacher, and thus inherited that kind of eloquence from his own family. The other part of it has to do with a little boy of inde nite race who looks white and who, through a series of

circumstances, comes to be reared by the Negro minister. They used to go around and the little boy preached; there have been plenty of examples of pairings like this, too, in actual life. One of the devices used was to bring the little boy into a service in a white co n, and, at a certain point, when the minister would preach of Christ's agony on the cross, saying "Lord! Lord! Why hast thou forsaken me?" the little boy would rise up from the co n.

HERSEY: Can you recall a little of the history of the development of the book?

ELLISON: I started working on it in 1958. Some of what I just told you appeared in *Noble Savage*, for which Saul Bellow was one of the editors. It was the same period when, at Saul's urging, I started teaching at Bard College. That was an unsettled period for us. We had spent two years in Rome, and Fanny was working, having gone back to the job she'd had before we went to Rome—where incidentally she had also worked. The Catholic Church had set up something called La Lampada della Fraternità, which was a veterans organization; they needed someone to set up a clerical system, and she went in there with her Berlitz Italian. It was quite admirable the way she went about it. When I came back, I didn't have a job. I was trying to stay out of activities in New York, so Bellow suggested that I live in his house in Tivoli because he and his wife and baby were spending most of the year in Minnesota, at the university. I got started on the book and wrote quite a lot of it, but was never satis ed with how the parts connected. The sections I have published have gotten good responses, and I've given public readings of other sections, always with satisfaction. I'm nding

myself having to try rst-person narration, and then try it again as third-person in an e ort to stay out of it as narrator myself. It's exasperating, but at the same time I've come to feel that one of the challenges for a writer who handles the kind of material I'm working with is to let people speak for themselves in whatever way you can. Then you draw upon more of the resources of American vernacular speech. One of the narrators is a newspaperman, a white, who had some radical experiences during the thirties and had an a air, which didn't end well, with a Negro girl.

HERSEY: What sort of time span do you cover?

ELLISON: Roughly from 1954 to 1956 or 1957. That is time present in the novel, but the story goes back into earlier experiences, too, even to some of the childhood experiences of Hickman, who is an elderly man in time present. It's just a matter of the past being active in the present—or of the characters becoming aware of the manner in which the past operates on their present lives. Of course this gets into the general history, because one of the characters is a senator.

He, too, is a trickster.

HERSEY: In our earlier talk you said, "I believe that ction does help create value, and I regard this as a very serious—I almost said

'sacred'—function of the writer." I know you have strong views about the moral fabric of the country. To what extent does ction have a bearing on that fabric?

ELLISON: At its best, ction allows for a summing up. The ction writer abstracts from the ow of experience certain abiding patterns, and projects those patterns as they a ect the lives and consciousnesses of the characters. So ction allows for a summing up. It allows for contemplation of the moral signi cance of human events. We don't always live up to the broader implications of this aspect of ction, I think, because sometimes, out of a sense of frustration or disgust, we don't consider what a powerful e ect vividly projected images of symbolic actions can have upon readers.

Think of the popularization of drugs and the let-it-all-hang-out

syndrome; these are very suggestive, and I believe writers might think a little bit about the implications of what they project, and of the kinds of heroes or antiheroes they project. Of course I'm not o ering formulas. Everyone has to work out his writing for himself, but the things he writes do have consequences. Sometimes you touch upon forces which are implicit, and you establish moods and give forms to attitudes. These are not always for the best. Someone asked me about all the burnings of tenements which occurred during the period after *Invisible Man* had been published; I had to point out that I had covered the Harlem Riot of 1943 for the *New York Post*, and I certainly wasn't recommending that people burn buildings

but was suggesting that this was a negative alternative to more democratic political action. When it is impossible to be heard within the democratic forum, people inevitably go to other extremes. There is always somebody to suggest that we live in an era of revolutions. In any case, it is that aura of a summing up, that pause for contemplation of the moral signi cance of the history we've been through, that I have been reaching for in my work on this new book.

ON BEING THE TARGET OF DISCRIMINATION

Ellison wrote this reminiscence and re ection on two childhood experiences with "the strange ways of segregated democracy," and his complex, self-sustaining, comic responses, for "A World of Di erence," a New York Times *supplement. It was published in* The New York Times Magazine, *April 16, 1989.*

IT isn't necessarily through acts of physical violence—lynching, mob attacks, or slaps in the face, whether experienced rsthand or by word of mouth—that a child is initiated into the contradictions of segregated democracy. Rather, it is through brief impersonal encounters, stares, vocal in ections, hostile laughter, or public reversals of private expectations that occur at the age when children are most receptive to the world and all its wonders. It is then begins the process of conscious questioning of self, family, and the social order which determines a child's attitudes, hopeful or cynical, as a citizen of this freewheeling, self-improvised society. Thus for its victims segregation is far more than a negative social condition; it is also a perspective that fosters an endless exercise of irony, and often inspires a redeeming laughter.

It got to you rst at the age of six, and through your own curiosity. With kindergarten completed and the rst grade ahead, you were eagerly anticipating your rst day of public school. For months you had been imagining your new experience and the children, known and unknown, with whom you would study and play. But the physical framework of your imagining, an elementary school in the process of construction, lay close at hand on the block-square site across the street from your home. For over a year you had watched it rise and spread in the air to become a handsome structure of brick and stone, then seen its broad encircling grounds arrayed

with seesaws, swings, and baseball diamonds. You had imagined this picture-book setting as the scene of your new experience, and when enrollment day arrived, with its grounds astir with bright colors and voices of kids like yourself, it did indeed become the site of your very rst lesson in public schooling—though not within its classrooms, as you had imagined, but well outside its walls. For while located within a fairly mixed neighborhood, this new public school was exclusively for whites.

It was then you learned that you would attend a school located far to the south of your neighborhood, and that reaching it involved a journey which took you over, either directly or by way of a viaduct which arched head-spinning high above, a broad expanse of

railroad tracks along which a constant tra c of freight cars, switch engines, and passenger trains made it dangerous for a child to cross.

And that once the tracks were safely negotiated you continued past warehouses, factories, and loading docks, and then through a notorious red-light district where black prostitutes in brightly colored housecoats and Mary Jane shoes supplied the fantasies and needs of a white clientele. Considering the fact that you couldn't attend school with white kids, this made for a confusion that was further confounded by the giggling jokes which older boys whispered about the district's peculiar form of integration. For you it was a grownup's mystery, but streets being no less schools than routes to schools, the district would soon add a few forbidden words to your vocabulary.

It took a bit of time to forget the sense of incongruity aroused by your having to walk *past* a school to get *to a* school, but soon you came to like your school, your teachers and most of your schoolmates. Indeed, you soon enjoyed the long walks and anticipated the sights you might see, the adventures you might encounter, and the many things not taught in school that could be learned along the way. Your school was not nearly so ne as that which faced your home, but it had its attractions. Among them its nearness to a park, now abandoned by whites, in which you picnicked and played. And there were the two tall cylindrical re escapes on either wing of its main building down which it was a joy to lie full-length and slide, spiraling down and around three stories to the ground—providing no

outraged teacher was waiting to strap your legs once you sailed out of its chute like a shot o a reman's shovel. Besides, in your childish way you were learning that it was better to take self-selected risks and pay the price than be denied the joy or pain of risk-taking by those who begrudged your existence.

Beginning when you were four or ve you had known the joy of trips to the city's zoo, but one day you would ask your mother to take you there and have her sigh and explain that it was now against the law for Negro kids to view the animals. Had someone done something bad to the animals? No. Had someone tried to steal

them or feed them poison? No. Could white kids still go? Yes. So why? Quit asking questions; it's the law, and only because some white folks are out to turn this state into a part of the South.

This sudden and puzzling denial of a Saturday's pleasure was disappointing, and so angered your mother that later, after the zoo was moved north of the city, she decided to do something about it.

Thus one warm Saturday afternoon with you and your baby brother dressed in your best she took you on a long streetcar ride which ended at a strange lakeside park, in which you found a crowd of noisy white people. Having assumed that you were on your way to the integrated cemetery where at the age of three you had been horri ed beyond all tears or forgetting when you saw your father's co n placed in the ground, you were bewildered. But now as your mother herded you and your brother into the park you discovered that you'd come to the zoo, and were so delighted that soon you were laughing and babbling as excitedly as the kids around you.

Your mother was pleased, and as you moved through the crowd of white parents and children she held your brother's hand and allowed as much time for staring at the cages of rare animals as either of you desired. But once your brother began to tire she herded you out of the park and toward the streetcar line. And then it happened.

Just as you reached the gate through which crowds of whites were coming and going, you had a memorable lesson in the strange ways of segregated

democracy as instructed by a guard in civilian clothes. He was a white man dressed in a black suit and a white straw hat, and when he looked at the fashion in which your mother was dressed, then down to you and your brother, he sti ened, turned red in the face, and stared as though at something dangerous.

“Girl,” he shouted, “where are your *white* folks!”

“White folks,” your mother said. “What white folks? I don’t *have* any white folks. I’m a Negro!”

“Now, don’t you get smart with me, colored gal,” the white man said. “I mean where are the white folks you come *out* here with!”

“But I just told you that I didn’t come here with any white people,” your mother said. “I came here with my boys …”

“Then what are you doing in this park,” the white man said.

And now when your mother answered you could hear the familiar sound of anger in her voice.

“I’m here,” she said, “because I’m a *tax-payer*, and I thought it was about time that my boys have a look at those animals. And for that I didn’t *need* any *white* folks to show me the way!”

“Well,” the white man said, *“I’m* here to tell you that you’re breaking the law! So now you’ll have to leave. Both you and your chillun too. The rule says no niggers is allowed in the zoo. That’s the law and I’m enforcing it!”

“Very well,” your mother said, “we’ve seen the animals anyway and were on our way to the streetcar line when you stopped us.”

“That’s ne,” the white man said, “and when that car comes you be sure that you get on it, you hear? You and your chillun too!”

So it was quite a day. You had enjoyed the animals with your baby brother and had another lesson in the sudden ways good times could be turned into bad when white people looked at your color instead of *you*. But better still,

you had learned something of your mother's courage and were proud that she had broken an unfair law and stood up for her right to do so. For while the white man kept staring until the streetcar arrived she ignored him and answered your brother's questions about the various animals. Then the car came with its crowd of white parents and children, and when you were entrained and rumbling home past the ne lawns and houses, your mother gave way to a gale of laughter; in which, hesitantly at rst, and then with assurance and pride, you joined. And from that day the incident became the source of a family joke that was sparked by accidents, faux pas, or obvious lies. Then one of you was sure to frown and say, "Well, I think you'll have to go now, both you and your chillun too!" And the family would laugh hilariously.

Discrimination teaches one to discriminate between discriminators while countering absurdity with black (Negro? Afro-American?

African-American?) comedy.

When you were eight you would move to one of the white sections through which you often passed on the way to your father's grave and your truly last trip to the zoo. For now your mother was the custodian of several apartments located in a building which housed on its street oor a drug store, a tailor shop, a Piggly Wiggly market, and a branch post o ce. Built on a downward slope, the building had at its rear a long driveway which led from the side street past an empty lot to a group of garages in which the apartments' tenants stored their cars. Built at an angle with wings facing north and east, the structure supported a servant's quarters which sat above its angle like a mock watchtower atop a battlement, and it was there that you now lived.

Reached by a ight of outside stairs, it consisted of four small rooms, a bath, and a kitchen. Windows on three of its sides provided a view across the empty frontage to the street, of the backyards behind it, and of the back wall and windows of the building in which your mother worked. It was quite comfortable but you secretly disliked the idea of your mother living in service and missed your friends who now lived far away. Nevertheless, the neighborhood was pleasant, served by a substation of the streetcar line, and marked by a variety of activities which challenged your curiosity. Even its a

uent alleys were more exciting to explore than those of your old neighborhood, and the one white friend you were to acquire in the area lived nearby.

This friend was a brilliant but sickly boy who was tutored at home, and with him you shared your new interest in building radios, a hobby at which he was quite skilled. Your friendship eased your loneliness and helped dispel some of the mystery and resentment imposed by segregation. Through access to his family, headed by an important Episcopalian minister, you learned more about whites and thus about yourself. With him you could make comparisons that were not so distorted by the racial myths which obstructed your thrust toward self-perception; compare their di erences in taste, discipline, and manners with those of Negro families of comparable status and income; observe variations between your friend's boyish lore and your own, and measure his

intelligence, knowledge, and ambitions against your own. For you this was a most important experience and a rare privilege, because up to now the prevailing separation of the races had made it impossible to learn how you and your Negro friends compared with boys who lived on the white side of the color line. It was said by word of mouth, proclaimed in newsprint, and dramatized by acts of discriminatory law that you were inferior. You were barred from vying with them in sports games, competing in the classroom or the world of art. Yet what you saw, heard, and smelled of them left irrepressible doubts, so you ached for objective proof, for a fair eld of testing.

Even your school's proud marching band was denied participation in the statewide music contests, so popular at the time, as though so airy and earth-transcending an art as music would be contaminated if performed by musicians of di erent races.

Which was especially disturbing because after the father of a friend who lived next door in your old neighborhood had taught you the beginner's techniques required to play valved instruments, you had decided to become a musician. Then shortly before moving among whites your mother had given you a brass cornet, which in the isolation of the servant's quarters you practiced hours on end.

But you yearned to play with other musicians and found none available. Now you lived less than a block from a white school with a famous band, but there was no one in the neighborhood with whom to explore the mysteries of the horn. You could hear the school band's music and watch their marching, but joining in making the thrilling sounds was impossible. Nor did it help that you owned the scores to a few of their marches and could play with a certain facility and fairly good tone. So there, surrounded by sounds but unable to share a sound, you went it alone. You turned yourself into a one-man band.

You played along as best you could with the phonograph, read the score to *The Carnival of Venice* while listening to Del Steigers executing triple-tongue variations on its themes; played the trumpet parts of your handbook's marches while humming in your head the supporting voices of horns and reeds. And since your city was a

seedbed of Southwestern jazz you played Kansas City ri s, bugle calls, and wha-wha-muted imitations of blues singers' pleas. But none of this made up for your lack of fellow musicians. Then, late one Saturday afternoon when your mother and brother were away, and when you had dozed o while reading, you awoke to the nearby sound of live music. At rst you thought you were dreaming, and then that you were listening to the high school band, but that couldn't be the source because instead of oating over building tops and bouncing o wall and windowpane, the sounds you heard rose up, somewhat mu ed, from below.

With that you ran to a window which faced the driveway, and looking down through the high windowpane of the lighted post o ce you could see the metal glint of instruments. Then you were on your feet and down the stairs, keeping to the shadows as you drew close and peeped below. There you looked down upon a room full of men and women postal workers who were playing away at a familiar march. It was like the answer to a silent prayer because you could tell by the sound that they were beginners like yourself, and the covers of the thicket of handbooks revealed that they were of the same set as yours. For a while you listened and hummed along, unseen but shaking with excitement in the dimming twilight. Then, hardly before the

idea formed in your head, you were skipping up the stairs to grab your cornet, lyre, and handbook and hurtling down again to the drive.

For a while you listened, hearing the music come to a pause and the sound of the conductor’s voice. Then came a rap on a music stand and once again the music. Now turning to the march by the light from the window, you snapped score to lyre, raised horn to lip, and began to play, at rst silently tonguing the notes through the mouthpiece and then, carried away with the thrill of stealing a part of the music, you tensed your diaphragm and blew. As you played, keeping time with your foot on the concrete drive, you realized that you were a better cornetist than some in the band, and grew bold in the pride of your sound. Now in your mind you were marching along a downtown street to the ying of ags, the tramping of feet,

and the cheering of excited crowds. At last by an isolated act of brassy cunning you had become a member of the band.

Yes, but unfortunately you then let yourself become so carried away that you forgot to listen for the conductor’s instructions which you were too high and hidden to see. Suddenly the music faded and you opened your ears to the fact that you were now rendering a lonely solo in the startled quietness. Before you could fully return to reality there came the sound of table legs across a oor and a rustle of movement, ending in the appearance of a white startled face in the opened window. Then you heard a man’s voice exclaim, “I’ll be damn, it’s a little nigger!” Whereupon you took o like quail at the sound of sudden shotgun re.

Next thing you knew, you were up the stairs and on your bed, crying away in the dark your guilt and embarrassment. You cried and cried, asking yourself how you could have been so lacking in pride as to shame yourself and your entire race by butting in where you weren’t wanted. And this just to make some amateur music. To this you had no answers, but then and there you made a vow that it would never happen again. Then, slowly, slowly, as you lay in the dark, your earlier lessons in the absurd nature of racial relations came to your aid, and suddenly you found yourself laughing, both at the way you’d run away and the shock you’d caused by joining unasked in the music.

Then you could hear yourself intoning in your eight-year-old's imitation of a white Southern accent. "Well, boy, you broke the law, so you have to go, and that means you and your chillun too!"

BEARDEN

A friend of painter Romare Bearden for nearly ve decades, Ellison delivered this eulogy in which he notes the aptness of collage as an American form, on April 6, 1988, at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. It was published in Callaloo, *Summer 1988.*

LET me begin by saying that Romie frequently got me into trouble.

Nothing physical, mind you, but di culties arising out of our attempts to make some practical sense of the relationship between art and living, between ideas and the complex details of consciousness and experience. Of course there can be no nal answers to such questions, and so today I nd Romie challenging me from beyond the limits of death and dying.

It was my good fortune to know Romie from my early days in New York. I met him when I was a edgling writer working (some would say "boondoggling") on the Federal Writers Project, and when he was an unknown painter who worked for the New York Department of Welfare. At the time I knew very little about painting as such, but thanks to having taken a class in sculpture at Tuskegee and to my exposure to avant-garde magazines, I had developed a more than casual interest in the visual arts. I became even more interested once I realized that I had found in Romie an artist who could talk knowledgeably about my own passion, which was literature.

At the time I was very much involved with the poetry and plays of Frederico Garcia Lorca. I discovered that Romie knew a great deal about Garcia Lorca. I was interested in the poetry of Eliot and the ction of Hemingway, and I was delighted that they too had aroused his interest. Indeed, I soon discovered that Romie knew about many matters that I in my naïveté hadn't expected a painter to know, and when I accepted this fact my life was unexpectedly enrichened.

Earlier today I tried to think back to the circumstance through which I was prepared for my relationship with Romie, and by what stroke of fate I had been made ready for his impact upon my sensibilities. (Incidentally, I have no concrete idea about how *Romie* was prepared for his contact with such an oddball as myself, but I suspect that reading played a part.) Nevertheless, as I thought back I realized that there had indeed been a forerunner of Romie in my life, and that my interest in drawing and painting went directly back to an older boy who lived next door.

This was in Oklahoma City, and that boy, that hero of my childhood, lled his notebooks with cartoon characters who acted out visual narratives that I found far more interesting than those provided by the newspaper comic sections. More interesting because they were about *us,* about Negro boys like ourselves. He lled his notebooks with drawings which told the stories of Negro cowboys and rodeo stars like Bill Pickett, of detectives and gangsters, athletes, clowns and heroes. Indeed, he created such a variety of characters and adventures that our entire neighborhood took on a dimension of wonder. But for me the most amazing part was the fact that all this was done by someone I knew, by the fellow living just next door who allowed me to look on as he gave form to gures, scenes and adventures on page after page of notebook paper. But then as my friend and I grew older, Fate, the old “good-bad,” struck our lives in its ever ambiguous way.

There came a day when his father sat us down beneath their towering apricot tree and proceeded to teach him the trumpet and me the alto horn. For me this was a stroke of good fortune, but there’s a question about whether that was true for my friend. While our community was highly enthusiastic in fostering music, it lacked adults who might have encouraged my friend’s artistic talents. Thus it was that he went on to become a musician and barber like his father. So it was in Romie that I found the ful llment of my earlier friend’s promise and the continuation of that stimulating friendship.

However, it was no mere duplication of past experience, for while Romie was more mature and intellectually curious, he was no less generous in sharing his talent and in discussing his struggle for mastery with me.

I can remember visits to Romie's 125th Street studio during which he stood at his easel sketching and explaining the perspectives of the Dutch and Italian masters. At other times he played with the rhythms of Mondrian and related them to the structure of jazz, and on still other occasions he explained some of the magic by which color became space, space became perspective, and color became form. He also had much to say about the nature of African sculpture.

It was his generosity in sharing such knowledge that made Romie Bearden such an a rmative gure in my own struggle to acquire writing skills. True, among my friends there was a world-famous writer, and another, with whom I held endless discussions of our mutual craft, who would soon be widely acclaimed, but Romie's approach to art and his line of development seemed closer to my own. Thus when it seemed impossible that I would ever get anywhere with my writing, I could talk with him, take heart from his progress and feel encouraged. Better, I could observe and discuss his search for more e ective techniques with which to give artistic form to his conceptions of our general experience. Each of us was concerned with the relationship between artistic technique and individual vision, and we were especially concerned with the relationship between our racial identity, our identity as Americans, and our mission as writer and artist.

Romie's father was a teller of tales, and Romie, whose art even at its most abstract retains an element of narrative, enjoyed regaling his friends with folk tales. These arose out of a need to impose form upon experience, and Romie's delight in them led me to realize that here again we shared a stream of Afro-American culture which I had received from my Oklahoma background and Romie from living in North Carolina, Pennsylvania and New York. This shared ancestral lore made for a level of unspoken communication which connected the past to the present, and of course we shared many of the wide variety of experiences that were available during the thirties. New York was a center of opportunity in which the aspiring could form contacts with recognized artists and writers. Libraries, art galleries and museums were there to be used by those with the curiosity and interest to use them, and we did.

Those were also days of great excitement in Harlem, for in many ways it was still a place of glamour. Those were the days of the swinging big bands, days when the streets of Harlem were lled with celebration every time Joe Louis knocked somebody out in the ring, days when we danced the Lindy at the Savoy Ballroom, and nights when new stars were initiated on the stage of the Apollo Theater.

Yes, but those were also the days of the Depression, days of *dispossession* and of protest marches. Harlem was growing edgy, and Romie observed its e ects most intimately through his work with the Welfare Department. There was a great turbulence growing in American society, much of it racial, and it became a subject both of our discussions and our artistic e orts. The question was, how did one express it in art? How sharpen its impact and render it artistically e ective? How transform dismal sociological facts into art? Many attempts were being made, and certain ideological formulas were recommended as solutions, but I myself felt that they were reductive, that they overemphasized the negative aspects of our condition while leaving unnoticed the tragic-comic transcendence through which we had survived and remained hopeful, both as individuals and as a people. Most of all, such ideological formulas sought to reduce our complex American identity to the single aspect of race. I suspected, and Romie's work a rmed, that perhaps there were other ways of going about giving expression to the times. Perhaps the solution lay in other, more eclectic approaches. Art itself was a form of freedom, and there was a world of art complete with all the styles and complex techniques through which artists had confronted experience and given it artistic form. That world was ours to draw upon. Yes, and there were the rituals—religious, fraternal, social—through which our people had imposed order upon the chaos of their lives. There were the interrelations between such rituals that were shared by Americans of various backgrounds to be drawn upon. Therefore the image of American society presented by the newspapers, magazines and radio often missed much of the sheer human complexity of the life we knew. That life was marked by a ceaseless resistance against all attempts to reduce its complex humanity, whether by force or ideology, and by example it pointed a direction for the writer and artist. Thus each of us decided in his own way to nd the artistic means with which to express our complex sense of American and Afro-American variety and diversity, discord and unity, and we decided that to do this one

had to draw upon one's own unique experience. One had to discover one's means and direction by going

into the self, and by identifying one's self with all that claimed one's respect and aroused one's sense of wonder. In brief, we came to believe that it was the role of the artist to confront and impose his own artistic sense of order upon the world.

Since there are hundreds of you gathered here who knew those times and who shared their hopes and disappointments, there is no need for me to continue with this bit of background. You know very well how it worked out for Romie. Some of the results, the paintings, are here in this cathedral. Some are in magazines, in books and in many museums. They are in many places, and in all their settings they speak eloquently of a promise which goes far beyond the designs and gures displayed within their frames.

Over the years we have come to speak of Romie as "Bearden" and we recognize him as a great master of collage. Now perhaps we should remind ourselves that we are a *collage of a nation*, and a nation that is ever shifting about and grousing as we seek to achieve the promised design of democracy. Therefore one of the reasons that *we* revere Romie is for his discovery that one of the ways for getting at many of the complex matters which we experience, but seldom nd recorded in o cial history, is through art. Art is the mystery which gets left out of history.

We are thankful to have known him, and to have shared some of his discoveries. Of this we are certain: we shall be discovering more and more about Bearden and his work as we discover more about—

and accept the responsibility of confronting—the wonderful complexity of American life.

NOTES FOR CLASS DAY TALK AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Ellison spoke at Columbia University's Class Day ceremony on May 15, 1990.

Found in his papers, this fragment, dated May 24, 1990, exempli es his characteristic use of Kenneth Burke's "representative anecdote" to illustrate the incongruities and complexity of American life—in this case an encounter with a young black man wearing a Confederate Army cap. The "notes" appear in print here for the rst time.

YESTERDAY while I was taking my after-lunch walk, a tall young brown-skinned man strode toward me carrying himself with a proud military bearing subtly combined with a subdued version of Harlem strut. In itself this was not unusual. Traditionally, Afro-Americans have made walking a form of art, as with "Walking the Dog" and

"Strutting with Some Barbecue," both of which began as playful vernacular struts through which such chores as walking pets and going on errands for food became steps in the stage routines of professional dancers. Symbolic communication through bodily movement is not only traditional but linked to modes of unspoken social commentary, satire, caricature, disavowal, intimidation and one-upmanship. You now see it in basketball, a sport which such young men as the one now approaching me have endowed with touches of ballet and aerial gymnastics.

Therefore as the young man drew closer it wasn't his artful walk that drew my attention. Nor was it the grim set of his features. But when we were face to face and I looked up to see that he was wearing a gray cap which bore the insignia of the Confederate Army, I was abbergasted. It was as though the most tragic incident in American history had leaped from a New York sidewalk to confound me with a transformation of the color symbolism which had ignited the Civil War.

"So you've joined the Confederacy," I managed to sputter, to which tentative question there was only a grim look of reply.

The young man continued his march and I continued mine, but then I paused, looked back, and there he was, hands on hips, Confederate-capped head thrown back, bubbling with uncontrollable laughter.

I joined in his laughter as I continued my walk, but frankly my head was spinning. While I knew that such caps and insignia were available in

novelty stores and had often seen Northern white boys driving cars adorned with the “Stars and Bars,” this was the rst time ever that I had seen a man of color so adorned. The question of what it all meant—what was comic put-on, what desperate threat—

gave a somber note to my laughter. Then as I passed the homeless,

the young drug hustlers and addicts who make use of the benches on Riverside Drive, and the lovable nursery school children playing nearby, I thought of the newspaper and television reports of recent developments in racial relations that are taking place in cities and on college campuses, and my mood became grim.

After all, I had been asked here to Columbia to participate in the celebration of this wonderful occasion, this rite of passage, through which you are moving up to nd your places in our democratic social hierarchy, and I felt obligated to be as joyful as you yourselves have the right to be. You’ve earned it, and I hope that your next steps will move each of you always higher and higher toward your envisioned goal. Thus, as I thought of what I might say to you, my mind kept returning to that Confederate cap on the young man’s head, and I was startled when my alter ego whispered,

“Ellison, the Confederates were also *Americans,* and so, God help him, is he!” With that I recalled that comedy and gallows humor are traditional ways that hard-pressed Americans have used in dealing with the problems of social hierarchy.

Then I recalled Robert Penn Warren’s stress upon the Declaration of Independence as the basic script from which the drama of American social hierarchy is enacted. The Declaration is the moral imperative to which all of us, black and white alike, are committed.

Though our history is one long list of struggles to make the values of that document manifest in the structure of our society, our history has also been marked by endless attempts to evade our moral commitment to the ideal of social equality. To do violence to Francis Thompson’s *The Hound of Heaven:* We’ve ed it, down the arches of the years; / We’ve ed it down the labyrinthine ways *Of our own minds; and in the midst of tears* We’ve hid

from it, and under running laughter. *Up vistaed hopes we've sped;* And shot, precipitated, *Adown Titanic glooms of chasméd fears,* From those strong Feet that followed, followed after. *But with unhurrying chase,* And unperturbed pace, *Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,* They beat—and a Voice beat *More instant than the Feet*— "All things betray thee, who betrayest Me."

FOREWORD TO *THE BEER CAN BY THE HIGHWAY*

Ellison was long an admirer of John Kouwenhoven's work on the "interaction"—

sometimes "in a complex process of antagonistic cooperation"—"between the cultivated and vernacular modes as they nd expression in American culture."

Written in 1981, this essay was published in 1988 as the foreword to the Johns Hopkins University Press edition of The Beer Can by the Highway.

THERE sits on a glass-topped stainless steel table in our living room a small goblet with slitted sides that swirl upward from its round, pinched shaft to form a bowl that is "bellied," to borrow a gure from T. S. Eliot, "like the g's fruit." This surprising object was created on a busy downtown New York street by an Afro-American craftsman-vendor out of a Shasta Lemon Lime Soda can. My wife, who had watched its magical creation (during which the craftsman knelt on the sidewalk carrying on an open-ended, P. T. Barnum spiel), was so delighted that she bought it right out of his ickering ngers. When she arrived home all excited and began explaining the origin of her prize I took a look, felt a light bulb glow in my head, and thought to myself, "Well, now, John Kouwenhoven, it's not exactly a *beer* can, but it's more than ample proof that somebody out there is continuing to a rm your insights into the interaction between the cultivated and vernacular modes as they nd expression in American culture!"

Of course they are, whether it be our street craftsman, the artists of Pop Art, architects responsible for the rash of skyscrapers that are darkening the streets of New York, the exponents of the latest variant of rock-and-roll, or the designers of automobiles who have found a more functional form for

hoods, tops and fenders. And for all the reasons—geographical, political, economic, technological and aesthetic—that Kouwenhoven analyzes in *The Beer Can by the Highway*.

But for the moment let's keep an eye on our gobletized soda can and consider what must have happened before this marvelous product of vernacular prestidigitation became possible: a beverage can worth all of ve cents (if returned to a supermarket) was emptied of its bubbly contents and discarded. It doesn't matter whether it was beside a highway or in the aisle of a subway car; the point here is that in the course of its transformation this sibling to a beer can escaped its expected, routine fate of recycling as scrap metal and became instead an *objet trouvé*. Then, as though to challenge our easy de nitions of "waste" and "raw material," *high* style and *low*, and propel us back to Kouwenhoven's writings, our

can lands in the hands of a "vernacular" craftsman who proceeds (and without attempting to erase any evidence of its past identity as mere container—neither paint, gleam, computerized bar-code, nor lettering) to transform it into a charming classical form.

Here we have a poker-faced American joke in which an object democratically available to even the commonest of common citizens ends up mocking both the elaborate technology and economic motive which gave it birth, while aunting the impulses, vernacular and classical, that interacted in a complex process of antagonistic cooperation to give it its present shape and setting. In its metamorphosis toward its present form our can progressed, thanks to industrial technology, from a handful of common ore to a mass-produced utilitarian vessel, and then had been transformed by an anonymous craftsman of pluralistic American background and taste into a work of art.

"But wait!" you say. "A can is a can is a can, and as such a form is admirably tted to an admirable function. But that gaudy, split-sided thing you're describing couldn't contain a bubble of ale or bail the spray from a boat!" Which, if you insist upon looking only for the *old* in the new, is quite true. But while it is evident that our gobletized can is no longer functional as in its old utilitarian state, it has assumed nevertheless a *new* and useful function indeed. For now, as it sits on its Miesian table, not only does it

delight its viewers' eyes, but it challenges us to think with playful seriousness about the relationship between America's democratic ideals and its culture. Yes, and about the ways in which those ideals inspirit not only our diverse citizenry, but also even the humblest of products and processes, sports and games, nightmares and dreams. It challenges us to think about such matters as carefully as Kouwenhoven has thought about the *Americanness* of everything that binds us, from our technology-propelled search for national selfconsciousness as it is a ected by our pervasive self-doubt, to our volatile mixture of vernacular and cultivated taste, to the designs of our skyscrapers, the nature of jazz, comic strips and advertising, to our grids of beer-can-strewn streets and highways.

The Beer Can by the Highway was rst published in 1961, and since that time it has been quietly teaching Americans to discern in things both great and small, digni ed and pedestrian, that which is essentially "American" about American civilization. It is a work that springs from deep within that rich segment of the American grain which gave us the likes of Emerson, Whitman, Horatio Greenough and Constance Rourke—yes, and Mark Twain—and was written by a critic who has looked long and hard at American culture with that native mixture of comic and tragic vision which is so necessary if we are to make sense of our diverse, pluralistic society. Fortunately Kouwenhoven is a writer who possesses the irreverent eloquence to make us recognize the old in the new and the new that is emergent in old processes and objects, attitudes and customs.

Which is to say that he has an insightful knowledge of history, taste, and design. Thus he is able to make us see the negative in our vaunted positives, and the positives in our downplayed negatives.

Best of all, during a period when we are once again evaluating the meaning of the Constitution and assessing the gains and losses of the past two hundred years, he makes us aware of the intricate ways in which our ways of life mesh and/or clash with our democratic ideals. A mixture of scholarly erudition and wry, vernacular perception, *The Beer Can by the Highway* arrives at its larger insights through a careful scrutiny of small facts and processes, thereby making its perceptions democratically available to all readers, whether learned or casual. Since I have long rated it one of the

most provocatively American of books, I am not surprised, only delighted, that during these times of crisis, of abundance and famine, of controversy over who shall interpret the Constitution, of stock market dives, startling new technologies, atomic piles, industrial waste and garbage barges making futile trips through international seas in search of a noncontroversial burial site, the voluble *Beer Can* has taken on, like its Shasta cousin, a new and vibrant life.

ADDRESS AT THE WHITING FOUNDATION

One of Ellison's last public addresses was given at the Whiting Foundation's Writers'

Awards Ceremony at the Morgan Library in New York City on October 23, 1992.

Once again his theme is the complexity and continuity of American experience, exempli ed in this talk by his response to recent research on his grandfather, Big Alfred Ellison, a former slave who never learned to read or write but nevertheless was elected town marshal in Abbeville, South Carolina, during the Reconstruction. This address appears in print here for the rst time.

I'M a bit unsure of why I'm up here on this dais, but now that I am we'll get on with it, catch-as-catch-can. Which is to say that nding myself participating in a ceremony during which so many gifted writers are to be presented the Whiting Foundation's prestigious awards is intimidating. For while most writers exercise their craft isolated in shadows, and do so out of their dedication to art, the e orts of tonight's winners are being recognized in public, and that alone endows this occasion with an aura of dreamlike ful llment.

I'm reminded of something that Robert Penn Warren once wrote about the challenge which the Founding Fathers left future Americans to solve when they committed to paper the democratic ideals upon which this nation was founded. In a sense the Constitution and Bill of Rights made up the acting script which future Americans would follow in the process of improvising the futuristic drama of American democracy. The Founders' dream was a

dream of felicity, but those who inherited the task of making it manifest in reality were, alas, only human. Not only do Americans spring from di erent geographical areas, but they possess—and are possessed by—a variety of con icting attitudes, personal, social and regional. What's more, since the revolutionary days of its founding, this nation has grown so rapidly and transformed its landmass so chaotically that frequently we don't know where we are or where we're headed. In the course of our recent attempts to make the Founders' dream a reality, the media, especially television, that facile transmitter of composite images, has further increased our confusion —and this despite the fact that it also provides us with copious details from the past that charm, delight and instruct us.

Of such matters we're all aware, but tonight's occasion makes me realize once again how important it is that the United States continues to have writers, such as tonight's winners, who make the most of their personal experience. The Founding Fathers conceived this nation as a collectivity of *individuals* who, ideally, are united in their diversity. We are one and yet many, an ambiguity that involves our personal identities no less than it gives shape to our politics. Thus, given the zigs and zags of our country's development,

it is imperative that we keep the responsibility of achieving our individuality always consciously in mind.

Under the pressure of our nation's unresolved issues from the past and the rapidity with which technology is changing the modes of our living, the con ict between our national ideals and everyday reality is constantly increasing in intensity. This combination of forces increases our American tendency toward historical forgetfulness as we move toward and away from our national ideals.

Deny it or not, we live simultaneously in the past *and* the present, but all too often while looking to the future to correct our failures, we pretend that the past is no longer with us.

Our national tendency to ignore or forget important details of our past reminds me of the philosophical stance of certain adults with whom I hunted during my boyhood in Oklahoma. After bringing down a rabbit or

quail, men would proclaim in voices that throbbed with true American optimism, “A hit, my boy, is history!”

But if they missed and the game got away, they’d stare at the sky or cover and say, “A miss, my boy, is a mystery.”

Well, in this country there have been many hits that are now attributed to the success of our democratic ideals. On the other hand, there have been misses in our attempts to achieve our democratic commitments that are so embarrassing that we have a tendency to assign our failures to the world of mystery.

Actually such failures spring from our confusions of motive and misguided e orts, which too often we try to sweep under the rug instead of addressing their consequences forthrightly. This, I think, is one of the implicit functions of American writers. Whether they be poets or novelists, essayists or dramatists, they are challenged to take individual responsibility for the health of American democracy.

It is their role to transform the misses of history into hits of imaginative symbolic action that aid their readers in reclaiming details of the past that nd meaning in the experience of individuals.

At any rate, such ideas came to mind recently when I began reading a book which its author was kind enough to send me. This book, titled *Old Abbeville: Scenes of the Past of a Town Where “Old*

Time Things Are Not Forgotten,” is a history of old Abbeville, South Carolina, which you might recall as the birthplace of the national con ict over slavery, the war which is known in the South as the War Between the States. It was also the home of John C. Calhoun and General Sam McGowan, one of General Robert E. Lee’s lieutenants and later the chief justice of South Carolina. The author of *Old Abbeville* is Professor Lowry Ware, a historian emeritus of South Carolina’s Erskine College.

Somehow in poking into the mysteries of his native state’s history, Professor Ware discovered that I too sprang from South Carolina via my father, who was born and grew up in old Abbeville. In his scholarly

research Professor Ware came across information about my grandfather that I found so unexpected that I erupted with laughter. While I had met my grandfather during the fourth year of my life, I had known him best as a mute patriarchal gure who stared from the wall in an old photograph. But now he had been brought so vividly to life in printed words on a page that I felt I'd been given a view of the mystery surrounding my roots.

Even more startling was the fact that the book had been written by a white South Carolinian. Thus I discovered a thread of my parental background snarled in the national tragedy which came close to destroying this nation but which left it drawn closer, if most contentiously, together. My reaction at nding my personal connection with slavery and emancipation stated in words was such a mixture of tragedy and comedy that it lled me with a blueslike laughter which caused my wife to ask what had come over me.

What had come over me was Professor Ware's research into my grandfather's activities during the Reconstruction. My laughter was ignited by learning that the man I knew as Grandpa was known in the town and surroundings as "Big" Alfred Ellison. Professor Ware then revealed that my grandfather had been a slave of the Reverend M. A. Ellison, who was pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, and that my grandfather and his brother, William Ellison, "became freedmen in Abbeville in 1865." According to Professor Ware, "the latter was, or soon became, educated and he served as a schoolteacher during the Reconstruction and later. Alfred never

learned to read or write, but his strength of body and character led to his appointment as town marshal in the spring of 1871 and enabled him to keep that position for most of the next seven years."

The Press and Banner, a local newspaper, "often made favorable comments on [Big Alfred's] services to the town. For example, on January 3, 1872, it noted, 'The peace of the village and the harmony of Christmas week were broken by two shooting scrapes.… John McCord, who had been arrested by Alfred Ellison, the town marshal, resisted the o cer and discharged his pistol without e ect, however, upon the marshal, who knocked him down, giving him a serious blow.'

“On August 5, 1873, [*The Press and Banner*] reported on an altercation between Arthur Je erson, a black county commissioner, and the marshal, when the former was ‘using a few more expletives than the marshal thought proper. Ellison, who is a powerful man, immediately disarmed Je erson and threw him down, without any particular regard as to which part struck the oor rst.… Alfred is usually able to take care of himself.’

“*The Press and Banner* on September 20, 1876, following a town election in which the white Democrats regained control of the local government, declared ‘the election of the town marshal takes place on next Monday. We think justice and our best interests as a town demand that a coloured man get the place.’ A week later, it reported that Alfred Ellison was reelected.”

Ladies and gentlemen and my fellow followers of the writer’s trade, I hope that what I’ve read from *Old Abbeville* has given you an idea of the living texture of human relationships that existed in the South during that turbulent phase of our history, and a better sense of the humanity of ex-slaves like my grandfather and his brother William. To that end I’ll bring this closer to our own times by reading the following:

In later years, Alfred Ellison took part in local Republican meetings, and in 1895 he testi ed before a Congressional Investigating Committee which was concerned with alleged irregularities in the election between Republican Robert Moorman and A. C. Latimer, Democrat. [Sounds like today!] Cross-examined by

Coleman L. Blease, Latimer’s attorney and later governor of South Carolina, Ellison’s testimony in part was: “Abbeville is my precinct. Been here nearly all my life. I voted. I registered. I had trouble in registering. I applied on the rst Monday in April, but got one in May by paying 25 cents for an a davit. I got the registration ticket but had to wait, on account of the Supervisor of Registration not doing his duty.… He waited on ten white men and more, and I standing there holding my a davit ready for him to register me. I was there between ve and six hours, waiting.… No trouble for white men to get registration tickets. Colored men had trouble.… I voted for General Hampton in 1876, but I am not a Democrat.”

The point that Big Alfred's grandson makes of all this is that the past still lives within each of us and repeats itself with variations.

Looking back, you feel the pain we'd like to forget because of its tragedy, but if we're to survive and get on with the task of making sense of American experience, we'll view it through the wry perspective of sanity-saving comedy. Incidentally, Professor Ware's research reveals that there are still existing records of more socializing between the white slave owners, freemen and slaves than even Faulkner has told us about, and I don't mean merely in the dark. There also were interracial parties that became the source of recriminations aired during political elections, which is another example of the mixture of past and present.

I'll close by reminding my fellow writers, as I frequently remind myself, that you're doing far more than creating interesting tales based on your individual view of the American experience.

Underneath your e orts you're helping this country discover a fuller sense of itself as it goes about making its founders' dream a reality.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

JOHN F. CALLAHAN is Morgan S. Odell Professor of Humanities at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. He has written essays and reviews on American and African-American literature for many publications, including *Saturday Review, The New Republic*, *New York, Esquire, The Chronicle of Higher Education, Callaloo*, *Chicago Review, African-American Review, 20th Century Literature*, and *American Literature*. His books include *The Illusions of a Nation: Myth and History in the Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (1972) and *In the African-American Grain: Call-and-Response in Twentieth-Century Black Fiction* (1988, 1990).

Callahan is literary executor for the late Ralph Ellison's estate and has edited the following posthumous collections of Ralph Ellison's work: *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison, Flying Home and Other Stories*, *Juneteenth*, and, with Albert Murray, *The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray*.

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